

ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Loretta
Brodeur

by Kim Night

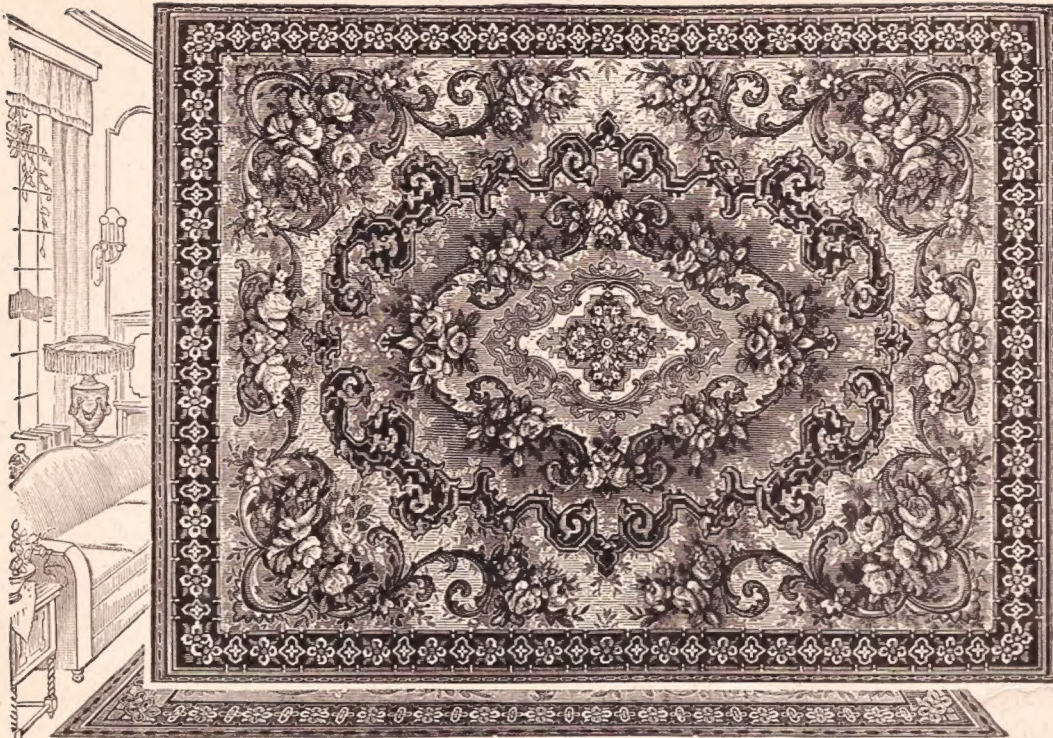
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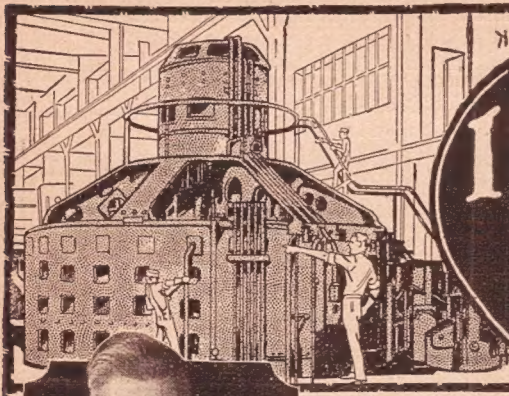
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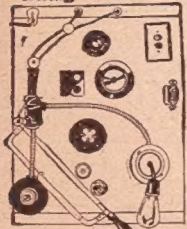
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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CLXVIII

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CLXVIII

SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 1925

NUMBER 3



Loretta Brodell

By KIM NIGHT

CHAPTER I.

THE WILD EAST.

AS he waited with the girl for the next onslaught, the glory of the combat was in Tim's eyes; his black hair was matted over a bleeding forehead; rivulets of sweat trickled down the cut cheek, but there was a grin of delight on the bruised mouth, a tilt of heroic defiance to the head. Four men had attacked them, and he had killed three. Pedro Lampaz was the last to leap over the bar, hurling a stream of fire out of his six-gun like some devil with thunderbolts in his hands. The hero caught him with a powerful, cleverly timed blow on the chin. The Mexican's gun fell clattering to the

sawdust. Taking the girl in his arms, Tim leaped through the window to the saddle of the waiting roan.

Mr. Chilton was transported into the dry, sage-scented air of an Arizona cañon. After he had closed the magazine he found it difficult to bring himself back to the cool, gray atmosphere of his club.

He invested the details of that huge Italian library with characteristics woven entirely out of his rather over-excited imagination. The pillars of porphyry were the rock battlements of a mesa. The hazy elegance of that ceiling had resolved itself

into a dome of splendid desert sky. The skeins of cigarettes rising lazily here and there were transformed to that feathery desert plant called the smoke-tree.

Through the clear plate glass of the window the Fifth Avenue crowd was a herd of cattle. On the other side the Gothic façade of a cathedral in the late afternoon sun, with pinnacles, parapets and flying buttresses, was the side of a cañon with rain-stained formations of red rock.

And as an undertone to that roar of the herd, there was the soft and lonely clip-clop of a cab-horse on the street. The sound of horses' hoofs was the keynote.

Inside again: There were two men not far from the leather-upholstered chair in which Mr. Chilton was deeply immersed. These two club members were at cards. One had a thin, aquiline face with jet black brows, a blue jaw and drooping eyelids. He might have been Pedro Lampaz.

In fact, as Mr. Chilton gazed intently at him, he did turn into Pedro Lampaz, dissolving after the illusory manner of the actors in moving pictures, from one personality into the other. His heavy watch chain and silk vest turned into a brilliant sash; his black straight hair was partly hidden by a sombrero; pompons decorated his trousers all the way down to where they flared out in bell shape like a Mexican toreador's.

What was this Mexican villain doing as he shuffled the pack with his spidery, jeweled fingers? He was fleecing an honest cow-puncher—that is to say, the club member opposite to him. The cow-puncher seated there in that aura of smoke at the gaming table was steadily losing his wages.

Mr. James Chilton riveted his eyes upon that vital drama. The cards were parted, bent by agile fingers, then brought together with a pleasant hum, like the hum of heel flies in the corral. Yes, the Mexican was cheating, damn him! Chilton's eyes were like the eyes of a buzzard. He could see a card flipped from under the pack.

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. The Mexican gentleman dissolved slowly back into a club member. The flare-shape trousers with pompons faded to dull gray, the black velvet jacket dissolved to an after-

noon swallowtail. The sombrero vanished, leaving the black, straight hair. The brilliant sash with its corn and plant design turned into a fancy vest.

The whole picture turned into an immaculately groomed gentleman by the name of Darril Morduant. Nothing in fact remained of that glorious picture of a Mexican gambler in a villainous desert posada except one detail: the spidery fingers with the onyx ring and the cards humming like heel flies!

And the cowboy opposite to him resolved himself likewise into an immaculate gentleman. Red bandanna, bearskin chaps, jingling spurs, holster and six-gun, the face reddened by sun, desert wind and jackass brandy—all dwindled to the inglorious Dr. Thurlow Rivers. Only one detail remained there likewise: the crimson face, for the doctor was flushed—not by jackass brandy, but by bourbon.

For a moment James Chilton watched his two fellow club members at their cards. In his mind it made no difference whether they were in a desert tavern or not. The same fundamental passions—avarice, treachery, drunkenness, existed. There was Mr. Morduant, a soft-voiced, spidery fingered gentleman cheating at cards. The red-faced gentleman with the childish blue eyes was being fleeced.

"If I were in Arizona, I would take out a bowie knife and pin Mr. Morduant's hand to the table for exhibition as you pin a butterfly on a card. Or, perhaps better, I would shoot him."

So Mr. Chilton gently mused.

The elegant clubman and gambler Mr. Morduant felt the burning gaze of Chilton's gray eyes upon him. He looked up across the intervening space of velvet carpet, chess table, lounge. Mr. Morduant's sallow face turned color.

There was no mistaking the flame he saw in those gray eyes. They were deadly, murderous, horrible.

Mr. James Chilton was a dangerous gentleman. The spidery fingered Morduant was actually afraid of him. He had, it was said, fought a duel when he was in Monte Carlo. He was a sharpshooter—having won some sort of a medal during his experience

in the American Expeditionary Force. He was a poloist, and otherwise an athlete of considerable fame. He was big, agile, cat-like, still fairly young.

He was the worst man in the world to be caught by while dealing from the bottom of the deck, for he was a sportsman. That was his only occupation at present; in the past he had killed men wholesale—dozens of them, they said. That was in the war, of course. There was also some terrible story of his father killing three men in a duel with swords in Baton Rouge. And his brother—well, the whole family in fact were murderers.

When the sallow faced and nimble fingered Mr. Morduant saw this gentleman lay down his magazine and leave his chair, he turned still paler. He would have trembled in the knees if he had only known how that magazine story had been heating Mr. Chilton's blood. He was in a murderous frame of mind.

Two minutes later pages stood with eyes bulging, mouths agape. Silver haired, elegant gentlemen in immaculately pressed and tailored suits gathered about, club members, guests and attendants were alike astounded at the spectacle.

They saw Mr. Morduant adjusting his perfectly fitting frock coat, his disarranged wing collar, his silken scarf. On his smooth jaw blood trickled down, making a rivulet in the Brunette face powder. He had been struck in the mouth, he had fallen, he had arisen with the light gone out of his dazed eyes.

In front of him stood the irate and flushed gentleman with whom he had been so quietly playing cards. By the side of this latter stood that tall, long-faced, gray-eyed, rather homely and dangerous gentleman who had been reading a Wild West yarn. Mr. Chilton was inscrutably calm, immovable, except that he was wiping his fist with a linen handkerchief.

Morduant thrust the back of his long fingered hand across his bleeding mouth.

"Mr. Chilton," he said quietly, but loudly enough so that in the deathlike silence every one in the library could hear, "you are a scurvy dog and a liar!"

Silence. But from the distant outside

world beyond that crystal-like plate glass and those arched windows there came the blare of automobile horns on Fifth Avenue. So quiet was it that you could hear the slow clip-clop of a horse out there. Then Chilton replied:

"Mr. Morduant, I will not repay that insult here—in this environment. But if you ever cross my path again, I will kill you!"

The flushed gentleman with the blue eyes seemed equal to the delicate demands of the situation. He did not raise his voice even though he had been drinking and was now violently excited. He could not, however, refrain from making the very extraordinary remark there before the club members and their guests:

"I will see that you pay me, Mr. Morduant. I don't propose to forget how much you have won from me in this manner during the past month."

It was disgraceful, unforgivable—the whole business. And all right there before the members, the attendants and quite a number of guests! What could have been worse? A murder could be outlived, but nothing like this!

Why couldn't they have written a letter or something of that sort? Morduant would have been blackballed likewise. The only one who had behaved in any way like a gentleman was Dr. Rivers—who was intoxicated.

What could be done? Nothing now, of course. Luckily enough all three men separated. The members, attendants and guests likewise melted away, and groups began to form in every corner of the club in which each member tried to find out as best he could what it was all about.

Dr. Rivers stumbled off to the buffet to get a drink. Mr. Morduant glided immediately to a desk, rang for paper and wrote out his resignation.

James Chilton returned to his magazine:

A terrific, bone-crashing blow sent his next assailant tumbling down the cañon walls. Mounting his horse and holding the girl in his arms as he galloped madly down the barranca trail, Big Tim Marraday reached the red boulder. He was under cover in the nick of time! Bullets spattered, ricocheted, dug into the sand, the sojuara, the granite.

One cut his arm. A bowie whizzed through his tall, peaked sombrero.

"This is wonderful!" Mr. Chilton breathed as he thrust his bruised knuckles into his mouth.

CHAPTER II.

A GUILTLESS CRIMINAL.

AT dinner time, having thoroughly saturated himself with the spirit of the "Wild West," James Chilton conceived a relentless hunger for Mexican tamales. He had been continually reading about them in that yarn which had so gripped him during the afternoon.

He had smelled the purple sage; he had become thirsty with the alkali dust churned up by galloping horses; he had felt the hot breath of the desert cañons on his brow; he had had the actual and soul satisfying experience of feeling his fist crash into a man's jaw; and now he had an actual hunger.

He sat looking out of the crystalline plate glass at the busses, cabs, motor cars and well-dressed people passing in two counter currents out there in the Avenue. They had assumed for him a shadowy semblance, very much as if they were the unreal figures which passed before that famous mirror of legend belonging to the Lady of Shallot. The real people to the adventurous sportsman, marksman, poloist and warrior, were the Mexican renegades and the cow-punchers of that yarn he had been reading.

It was his custom to sit there each night at that window, debating just where he would eat dinner; it was likewise his custom invariably to decide upon remaining to eat at the club buffet. On this particular night, however, it occurred to him that he had several times passed a restaurant down there in that world of polyglot eating-places fringing Times Square.

It had a sign outside announcing it as the Rio Grande Restaurant. *Regular Mexican Dinner. Tamales a Specialty.* The proprietor's name likewise was on the sign, prefixed by that splendid and villainous word, *señor*.

James Chilton invited the blue-eyed Dr.

Thurlow Rivers to accompany him. Dr. Rivers—so Chilton argued—should not go home to his wife until he was sober. Liquor had created the same desire for highly spiced fare in Dr. Rivers's stomach as imagination had in Mr. Chilton's. The two agreed to eat dinner together within an hour at the Rio Grande.

Chilton, a man of leisure, was the first to arrive. Once he had passed Broadway and the entrances of several theaters and actors' boarding houses, he found himself in a low-ceilinged narrow room. A plate glass window occupying apparently the whole of one end, admitted the kaleidoscope of lights from Times Square.

Electric bulbs, being extinguished and lighted again in rhythmic cadence, announced the play across the street. The wet pavements reflected the glare of café windows; red and green bands of light shot across drizzly spaces to illuminate giant signboards; a ghastly arc shone in the lettered windows of a dentist's office.

On a level with the Rio Grande was the large window of a hair-dresser's. Sputtering rays flared upon a girl with golden hair.

That was the scene just beyond the plate glass of the restaurant, but Chilton did not look in that direction for more than a glance. Inside he found himself abruptly transported to the Border. The posada with a few tables and a sawdust covered floor gave out what seemed a very authentic atmosphere. There were chile Colorado garlands—which looked and smelled like any one's idea of Mexico.

The place was kept by an old, gray whiskered halfbreed who announced to all his customers that he had once kept a chowcart in Tia Juana, where he made much more money than he did in New York. He pointed out the expensive details of his establishment.

On the walls were paintings of a bull fight in Texicala, a stampede, a stage coach, a battle scene between Apaches and frontiersmen, a gunfight in a Texicala barroom, and a group of stocktenders and cantina girls dancing the Texas Tommy. In between these paintings were Mexican flags, wall-nails with a lasso, a holster, a pump-gun, a buffalo gun, and a branding iron.

Chilton was so enthralled with these souvenirs of the splendid and unforgettable past, that he did not notice the lateness of the hour. The proprietor reminded him of dinner. Chilton looked at his watch. As he might have expected, that befuddled Dr. Rivers was late—unforgivably late.

"Yes, bring on your chile con carne, señor," he said. "I was waiting for a friend—who must have forgotten the street."

The proprietor brought out his dishes from an alcove in the rear of the room. There Chilton caught a glimpse of a fat dark woman with a broad face and high cheek bones. She was lazily engaged at kneading and flattening tortillas on a rock slab.

Placing the dish of parched maize and chile before Chilton, the proprietor stood scratching at his gray beard.

"I've seen men like you, señor, out there," he said. "Your eyes she is gray like the desert hombre. Your hand she is steady—like the gunman—non? I see the mark on your trigger finger! You are vaquero maybe?" He changed his estimate upon noting the elegance of Chilton's attire: "Maybe cattle king?"

"Never been West," Chilton said as he burned his mouth with the chile.

"You have shoot the gun? You have ride the cayuse?"

"The what?"

"The 'orse?"

"Oh, yes! And I try a little sharp-shooting just once in a while. The last time it was at a shooting gallery in Coney Island."

"Bueno! I was right! Thees New York hombres—ees no good. The eyes she is not steady. The 'and she shak' very mucho like mesquite twig! You are not New York. You can handle the six-gun. Non? Thees gun here—" He removed the revolver from the hand-tooled holster hanging on his cigar stand. "You see the notch? Too many to count. Every notch—she is mark for dead carcass!"

Chilton smiled—not skeptically. He was greatly pleased. That yarn he had been reading made a specialty of "notched guns."

"Wan bullet—here—" the proprietor showed him the chamber. "Ees silver bullet. No man has fired thees bullet! And yet from when the gun was construct' thees bullet she remains there."

Chilton ventured the opinion that if you tried to fire the bullet the gun might explode.

"Bueno! Ees very like! For why? Thees bullet is for the owner of the gun—when he is cornered by the *renegados*. Or when the Apache Indians will take him, the owner of thees gun he can kill himself to death. Ees good idea—otherwise the Apache mak the torture!"

"How much do you want for that gun, señor?"

The swarthy and gray haired proprietor shook his head. "My kinsman who was general in Sonora—he give me this gun. He say thees gun she is never fire'—except wan man is kill! No target practice; no hunting; jus' for the man! And never has she miss'. For long time ago a Hopi witch doctor he mak the charm on thees gun, I never sell. Some day when the police come in for to steal my cash, or to mak the extortion and the threat, then I use thees gun. I will kill five police hombre first. Then the silver bullet!"

He went out for the enchilada. Chilton gazed through the big, fly-specked, dusty window at the wet scene outside. The drizzle had turned to a miserable fall of snow—one of the late March storms.

The golden haired lady under the arc-light was emerging in a glory of newly made curls. The dentist's window was emitting its ghastly sputtering blue. The Chinese restaurant on the corner second story, was aflame with dancing red and green bulbs. Times Square was growing noisier every minute.

Chilton turned back to the setting of the wild frontier. His friend, Dr. Rivers, had arrived.

It was quite easy to see that the doctor's slight befuddlement of that afternoon had completely cleared. He stood there, his blue eyes focused upon Chilton with a keen and peculiar expression. Something evidently had happened to bring about this abrupt sobering process.

"Was it a Turkish bath that made you late?" Chilton asked.

The other cast a rapid, furtive glance at the woman making tortillas, at the gray whiskered posadero, at the sawdust covered floor, and at the big window which revealed Times Square.

"What has sobered you up so completely?" Chilton repeated.

Without removing his hat or overcoat, Dr. Rivers stepped to the table, clutched the other's arm.

"Come into this booth—over here—quick."

"Why? What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Into this booth so they can't hear. I've got something to tell you!"

Chilton could not fail to see the anxiety on the doctor's face. He made no protest, but left his seat and followed to the seclusion of a booth at the end of the room farthest from the Mexican woman.

"Don't raise your voice. Answer quietly," the doctor said in a low tense whisper: "Have you seen Morduant since you struck him this afternoon?"

"Certainly not!" Chilton replied in amazement. "Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask? Good God, man, you'll know why! It's unbelievable; this damnable trick of fortune! You struck him—knocked him down—threatened to kill him the next time he crossed your path! And now—"

Chilton looked up with a start. He felt as if a chill blade had cut him. "And now what?"

"He's found murdered—a bullet in his chest."

Chilton straightened. It was as if he were defending himself from some invisible blow. His lips were set. "Go on, tell the rest," he said softly.

"It was in his room up there in the club. Not long after our spat. In fact, it was discovered shortly before you left the club. Do you understand what that means?"

"Perfectly." Chilton seemed to collect himself. The first shock had passed. He began to reflect. "I will be suspected—until they find the real murderer." He said

this as if to himself, then turned abruptly to the doctor. "Look here, Rivers! You don't mean to say *you're* in doubt about me!"

The doctor swore. He returned the fierce stare of these gray eyes and said angrily: "We can't get anywhere with nonsense like that, Chilton. If you had murdered him, you'd have done it in the open."

The Mexican proprietor returned with another dish. Chilton explained that they had changed their seats because of the draught. Casually opening the husks of the tamale, he waited for the Mexican to leave. Then:

"It looks serious, doctor, but I'm not going to grow hysterical over it."

"You aren't—no! Of course not! You'll take it all as a joke. But look at me!"

Chilton had not thought of that. The doctor was a participant in that ugly little fracas.

"You don't mean to say, doctor, that you're afraid—"

"Hang it all, Chilton, of course I'm afraid! I'm in a worse position than you are! Morduant was found murdered. I went up there to his room shortly after our scrap with him."

"What! What's that you're saying?" Chilton exclaimed.

"I, of course, wanted to demand payment for the sums I've been losing to him the past month."

"You went to his room!" Chilton held up his hands in despair.

"Look here!" the doctor cried angrily. "I've been losing steadily because of his cheating. Any man would have made him pay!"

Chilton nodded. There was no argument on that point. "You went to his room. I take it, this was before he was murdered?"

The doctor nodded. "Morduant was there. He gave no argument whatever. Paid me. I left. Next thing I knew there was a big rumpus in the club about Morduant being found dead in his room!"

Chilton nodded his head. His big mouth hardened; the black eyebrows knitted.

"Yes, I see now. You will be questioned of course. No doubt about that.

In fact I myself will be questioned. We are both about equally to be suspected. Except—" he added as if regretfully, "except you see, you happened to go to his room."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that's all there'll be to it. They'll find the real murderer. He had a lot of enemies—that cad. You and I may have to answer a lot of questions. I doubt if they'd even arrest us—that is to say, not unless we gave evidence of trying to get away. *That*, of course, would be disastrous."

The doctor looked again to the other end of the room. The old man was there, and the fat woman was still busy with her tortillas. Then leaning over the table, Rivers whispered:

"Do you know, Chilton, it looked so bad, I actually thought *you* had gone up there and potted that man. It'd have been just like you, b'gad!"

Chilton paid him back with this: "How do I know you didn't murder the fellow yourself?"

"Hang it all, Chilton!" the doctor flared. "I can't see a joke now. It's too serious just getting it in the papers. Of course *you* don't mind that. It'll help your polo. '*Sportsman indicted for murder*'—and all that sort of thing."

"But look at me! My business depends on my reputation. Think of my wife. She'll lose her mind. You know the kind of woman she is. If I so much as get a summons for speeding, she goes into hysterics."

Think of this!

"And there's my daughter—going to be married next month. What'll *they* think—her fiancé's crowd! They wouldn't stand for it—that's all! Murder! Good God! They'll break the match off as soon as those headlines come out to-morrow. And I've never seen that little child so happy in my life!"

"Yes, I noticed that the last time I saw her, Rivers! That, I admit would be most unnecessary: whatever happens we must remember that. Let her remain happy! And let her mother remain happy! No torturing of the innocent. We'll put a stop to that!"

He alarmed Rivers by the thwack of his fist on the table. The two old Mexican peo-

ple stared. Chilton looked at his knuckles which he had split that afternoon. "Hang it all! I'm the one to blame! I mixed in where I didn't belong—and here I find that your wife—and your little girl—are going to suffer for it!"

"I'm not blaming you for that. You saw me getting fleeced. You did the right thing. The fellows at the club are on your side. That is to say, except for the fact that it happened in *their* club. But now—holy smoke, think of what's happened!"

Chilton turned abruptly to the proprietor. "Come on with the tamales, *señor!*"

The Mexican obeyed. Rivers was impatient. He refused to eat. "What are you going to do?" he asked in torment. "*You*, of course, have nothing to think about except yourself. Besides you can probably prove an alibi. I can't. I was there—right up there in his room!"

"If you had a wife and daughter you'd know what my position is! Why I damn well think I'd get up and dust—yes, I would! But how can I with my daughter—"

"No, you can't do that," Chilton declared quietly.

"And yet, the case is so strong against me, what if they convicted me—"

"Nonsense!"

"Such things have happened. And yet here I am—bound to stick it out and face that horrible possibility. Of course, don't misunderstand me—I wouldn't leave my wife and girl—not for all the wealth in the world. You see I've *got* to face it! But I must say if I had been in the position you are, it would be a simple matter. They wouldn't catch me—"

"You mean even though you are innocent you would run away?"

"I would run away from the chance of getting sent to the chair—as an innocent man!" the doctor asserted strongly.

"Yes, true enough. That might be wise," Chilton said seriously. "But you can't, of course." He was tensely silent, remorseful. He was thinking of that faithful woman—Rivers's wife. He was evoking the picture of the radiantly happy girl. Dr. Rivers's daughter had made a splendid match. It

was the old New York aristocracy; and it was by a strange coincidence an affair of love as well as convenience. An ugly matter to break into that young life with a murder scandal.

"I wish to God I had gone up to that room instead of you, Rivers!" Chilton muttered.

"Oh, bally rot!" the doctor rejoined. "What's that got to do with it?"

"You see I could run away," Chilton explained. "It would make me look guilty, I admit. But I could have a little fun of my own, I'll tell you, out there in the West. Escaping from the law! Wow! Wouldn't that be glorious! A horse and a six-gun! Into the unexplored cañons! I'd give them a merry chase, I'll tell you!"

"Look here, let's get down to business," the doctor said. "Just what are we going to do? Just what am I going to do? I've got to face it, of course. The whole truth. If it can only come out! The fact is I'm strapped. Can't do anything, and here I am expecting to be surrounded by plain-clothes men any minute. It'll take some nerve, I'll tell you—while I'm thinkin' of those poor souls at home.

"Like as not I'll botch the whole business by going to pieces! Not that I'm afraid of those bullet-headed crooks and cops that they'll sic on me—don't think that for a minute. I'm not afraid of death, either. *You* know that well enough! But it's thinking of my wife that makes it all so hard!"

Chilton apparently had not listened. He burst out suddenly as if he had been puzzling over a brain-racking problem, and had suddenly found the answer:

"I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"The answer!"

"Don't be an ass, Chilton. There is no answer. And don't be rash either. I can see something in your eye that tells me you're going to shoot down the whole police force."

"Purely as a matter of luck, I have just conceived an insatiable desire to live in the adventures of a frontier."

"Deuced lot that's got to do with it!" the doctor grumbled.

"Quite so. But it has suggested to me the answer to our riddle. If I had not been gorging myself with these yarns of the Wild West I might not have thought of the move I am about to make."

The other stared. He knew that James Chilton was capable of anything—no matter how hare-brained.

"I am going west to-night."

The doctor grunted disgustedly. "I thought you understood that situation. If you so much as leave town—or depart from your ordinary routine of life, you will attract the suspicion of the police. Don't forget that you, too, are in a delicate position; you threatened that fellow yourself this afternoon."

"That is just the reason I am going. I become from this moment a fugitive from justice. My blood is beginning to course with a splendid excitement. I am pursued. Don't smile. And, above all, please don't swear.

"When it is known that I have disappeared from the club, leaving everything up in the air so to speak, saying good-bye to no one, just peremptorily dropping from existence, then the riddle of Moduant's death will no longer bother anybody. The world will consider it very satisfactorily solved. The only question then will be: *Where is James Chilton?*

"You, of course, can go to your wife still retaining your spotless reputation. You will probably celebrate a little indiscreetly—but that hurts no one's reputation in these days of prohibition. As for me I get my greatest wish in life—to be a fugitive in the Arizona desert without fleeing my own conscience. What could be more soul satisfying than that? I could not have cut the pattern better if I were Destiny and the Three Fates.

"I hurt nobody. I benefit many; yourself and your estimable family. I also benefit the real murderer by decoying all suspicion from him, who, in my mind, did a very praiseworthy deed when he stopped Morduant's treachery forever!"

Dr. Rivers had listened breathless at first, actually aghast at this lunacy. But when the end came, he saw his own answer clearly enough. He said calmly:

"Of course you understand that I will not allow it."

"What have you got to say about it?" Chilton laughed.

"The real murderer will be found sooner or later," Rivers said hotly. "That is to say—unless some silly ass like you—"

"Dash it all I'm doing this for my own fun—"

"A lie. With my apologies."

"If you ball up my game," Chilton said in a deadly tone that made his friend shiver, "and let your wife and daughter go through the tortures of a murder trial, I'll come back and commit a real crime!"

The other retorted with scorn: "You actually are crazy enough to think I'll permit you to do this? I'll go straight to the police and do all in my power to prove that another man killed Morduant."

"That is the most sensible—the only sensible remark I've heard you make!" Chilton said. "If you can run down the actual murderer all right. I have nothing against him myself, but on the other hand I don't want to be outlawed all my life."

"You are going merely to deflect the suspicion that has fallen upon me!" the other insisted.

"Not for your sake, you old soak! But for your family—and for myself."

"I will accept on one condition."

"Your acceptance or refusal makes no difference. As soon as I finish this tamale I am going to the Arizona bad lands."

"My acceptance is based on this fact;" the other went on without faltering: "I understand that rather than to stay in New York and bear the consequences of the suspicion that has fallen on both of us, you will escape. By so doing you remove all suspicion from me—all possible disgrace from my wife and daughter. And at the same time you take all the suspicion on yourself and magnify it a hundredfold."

"Well and good! If you can stay out of the reach of the law long enough I guarantee to find the real criminal while you're gone. I will have plenty of time. I will be free to pursue the game in my own way. I will enlist the best detectives. The real criminal, whoever he is, will be out in the open, so to speak, for he will consider that

all danger is removed. With this understanding I'll let you go."

As Chilton had affirmed, his friend's acceptance of the plan would have nothing whatever to do with it. On Chilton's plate there were only the husks of his tamale. He got up, paid his check, shrugged himself into his coat. It was a shrug having the usual significance of devil-may-care.

"Do you want to ride down to Penn Station with me, Rivers?" he asked.

CHAPTER III.

EVEN BANDITS HAVE BAD LUCK.

A HORIZON of square mesas could be dimly distinguished against the first greenish gray light that precedes dawn. A flat plain of colorless gray swept westward, darkening toward the jagged black teeth of the Sierras. Beyond were the night sky and the morning star.

A spur from the Santa Fe cut down southwestward through two of those mesas, crossing the desert in as straight a line for a hundred miles as a geometrician could construct between two points. You could not see the tracks at that darkest part of the night which is the half hour before dawn.

But closer at hand there was a slight gleam of the iron reflecting some sort of light there in the desert which was hidden from the human eye. The obscurity, the silence was so obsolete, that it was like the interior of a cave. Yet in certain parts of the scene there seemed to be a deepening of the blackness.

There appeared to be forms hovering about; you could see the giant cactus lifting up its prongs. This cactus—the sahuaro—looked for all the world like terrified men standing here and there in the dark holding up their hands.

At a certain point where that straight line of tracks swerved to an upgrade toward the Sierras, four horsemen met. To their eyes dilated from long hours of night trailing many more details of that scene were revealed: the jet black patches of mesquite, the deep arroyos cut in the breast of the desert, the dry boulder washes of

creek-beds, and likewise a certain infinitesimal deflection of that perfect straight line.

It was infinitesimal only in comparison: for it was a matter of four inches, as compared to a line a hundred miles long. The reason those four horsemen knew it existed, was due to the fact that they effected it themselves. They had pulled out the fish-plates and spikes of three rails.

This simple little discrepancy in a perfect line a hundred miles in length had of course no visible effect on the landscape, but the four riders expected it to have within ten minutes. For at that time a train from the Silver Mesa Junction on the Santa Fe, bound for Lava on the southwestern side of the desert, was due to pass that point.

They waited a few minutes longer. The green light changed color beyond those immense battlements of squares on the horizon. Far off in between two of those mesas a tiny speck of light appeared like a star casting a long ray of light as it peeped up over the desert rim.

A voice from one of the horsemen came out in the deathlike stillness.

"I see its headlight now, men. But it'll take a good time to git here. Don't hurry. We got everythin' workin' smoothlike so long as no one wants to hurry. When you hear the sound on the rails, then you kin put your masks on. Leave the cayuses stand over there behind them ocotillo clumps. Don't want 'em to see our horses. All as we want for 'em to see, is four masked men boardin' the train just as she's derailed. Hold up the baggage car, then vamoze back into the dark."

"Speakin' of takin' our time, chief," another voice said, "what if that thar sun comes up afore we're through?"

"I've timed it for that," the man called "chief" rejoined. "Otherwise we'd have fixed the rails up there in the Sierra."

"If you'd of fixed it a good twenty miles east—on the t'other side of Mesquite Junction you'd had a couple hours afore sunrise instead of one. And now the train bein' late, you ain't got more'n fifteen minutes."

"He wanted the upgrade, that's why he didn't go east of Mesquite," another voice said.

"What's that got to do with it?" the

chief lit a cigarette, his match casting a lurid light into his flat ugly face. "This ain't a stage coach, it's the Santa Fe! I chose this here spot so's we could cut down Goldpan Cañon to the desert. And when we git trailin' down thar we need the mornin' light."

A faint hum filled the air above the rails.

"Cut out this fool palaverin' and git under cover," the chief ordered. "And don't let that thar headlight show 'em where you're at—or where your horses is at."

They dismounted. That twinkling little star grew. The ray broadened, swaying slightly from side to side. It was the only evidence of anything coming—except the increasing hum on the rails. The horses were left in a deep ravine, screened by ocotillo.

One of the men climbed to the bank of this draw and waited with his shoulders and arms on the rim. Another slunk behind a bowlder; the third stood behind a clump of cactus. Although only partially concealed, his outline, once his sombrero was removed, could not be distinguished from the cactus itself.

The leader lay flat upon the sand hidden by the mesquite over which only his sombrero and his eyes showed. Thus they waited while the band of light grew precipitously wider as it swept the tracks with the rocking of the train.

The rails vibrated. There was a distant shriek. The customary roar of a train, growing to its climax, was abruptly silenced.

The band of light steadied with a blinding glare illuminating the sand, the bowlders all about the four outlaws. The long cone of light cast every coulee and stream bed into a relief of jet blackness against the white silt, crossed with the elongated shadows of cactus.

The chief swore in his disgust and astonishment.

The man behind the cactus clump, finding himself suddenly in the glare of a searchlight, dropped to his hands and knees and scurried like a gopher for the mesquite.

The man peering over the rim of the ravine called out, "What the hell's happened, chief?"

"Happened?" the chief cried. "The train's stopped—that's what's happened!"

"They seen us then, chief, we better beat it!"

"Beat it? I guess damn well not, you yellow-livered skunks! The train's stopped. Well and good! That's all as we wanted anyways. Come on. Follow me! Crawl through the brush, stay under cover. Get to your nags. Then stay out'n the glare of that headlight!"

"The beans is spilled, chief!" one of the outlaws objected desperately. "How come they stopped that train afore they hit the twisted rail?"

"Some one has double-crossed us, chief. That thar train's stopped just in time! Some one's blowed the gaff!"

The chief had already crawled into the arroyo and mounted his horse. He drove out of the pitch blackness, his form emerging at each step of his mount into the glare of the light.

"Somethin' else stopped it!" he cried with an oath. "Are you snivelin' cowards comin' or not? No more palaverin'. We've got to ride fast!"

"I ain't ridin' fast nowheres!" one of his henchmen protested. "It's a trap—that's all! If we try to board 'em, we'll find out what kind of a trap it is! Not for me! I'm out, here and now!" Mounting his horse this speaker went clattering off into the darkness of the arroyo.

The leader hurled his curses after the deserter. Here was a good job planned—and at considerable expense of time, of trailing, of plotting, of waiting. Then at the moment of victory some measly little trick of circumstance was trying to defeat his whole game.

"All right!" he said turning to his two other henchmen who had also mounted. "We'll do without Swink—the little coyote. Don't need him. But I'll show him what it means to back down at the wrong minute. I'll mash every bone in his carcass! Come on, men. We three can turn the job. That train's stalled. Somethin's happened which ain't nothin' to do with us." He spurred his horse. "Come on, damn you—what're you waitin' for?"

"The sun'll be up afore we git thar,

chief!" one of them begged miserably. "Call it off. We ain't hankerin' for to horse right into a trap!"

The sky had turned red. The chief, facing the glare of that headlight, and seeing the brilliant dome beyond, felt suddenly frustrated by the many cross shadows. His men saw his indecision, and without any further parley, stuck their heels into their mounts and fled in great haste down the black arroyo.

The chief saw clearly enough that the tide of his good fortune was ebbing fast. His men had forsaken him. Of course, there was still a chance that he could hold up the train alone. But the light was coming. The advantage of boarding a train the moment that it had been derailed, when the crew and passengers were stunned—this advantage was now denied him. Then, too, there was the sun rolling up between those two granite table mountains.

Pasqual, the outlaw, shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. He emerged to the desert floor, standing there a giant horseman in the conflicting rays of dawn and the engine headlight. His men, galloping far off down the narrow trail of the arroyo glanced back to see just what their forsaken master was going to do. They saw him do a very peculiar thing.

Firm in the faith that the stalling of that train had nothing to do with his own plot to wreck it, Pasqual rode his horse up to the ties, and then followed a trail parallel to the tracks directly toward the waning glare of the headlight.

It was impossible to conceive that a trap had been laid. The three wretched renegades who were his henchmen were afraid of their own shadows. Whenever they set about to commit a raid, they imagined that the whole county and State must read their thoughts and know about it.

Not so with Pasqual. The danger to him was nothing. His identity was not yet known. It was even customary for him to go up to the sheriff at Mesquite and talk to him face to face after murdering some desert mucker. As for the present situation, he was consumed with curiosity.

He decided that at all costs he was going to find out just what sort of a practical joke

destiny was playing in bringing that train to a stop just before it came into the clutches of his gang.

CHAPTER IV.

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

PASQUAL rode his horse directly up to the locomotive. He saw a group of dim forms in the early morning light on the side of the tracks behind the last coach. His advent in their midst did not seem to throw them into the consternation he had anticipated.

The engineer and brakemen were swinging lanterns that had lost all brilliancy in the growing light. Some of them were scouting about in the mesquite brush a little distance from the track bed. Several passengers who had hastily drawn on trousers and boots were pelting excited questions at each other. The conductor was arguing in a loud voice with a heavy set man who was garbed in a tweed suit—the only passenger it appeared who had been dressed.

The rider reined in his horse. "What-all's happened, gents?"

One of the brakemen answered. "No one knows except that coot over there—" he pointed to the man in the tweed suit. "He was goin' to arrest some gunman who was ridin' in the sleeper. Got his jaw broke, too."

Pasqual dismounted. A horseman coming out of the desert seemed to intrigue the passengers. They gathered about him.

"What-all stopped the train, gents?" Pasqual asked.

"The gunman—he pulled the cord. That fat gent over there with the broken jaw—he thought he'd make an arrest quiet-like. Got a surprise!"

Another passenger added with great enthusiasm: "I heard it all, too! I was in the sleeper! No one knew a bandit was travelin' along with us. I seen him get on back at the spur—a big gent with a long face and gray eyes. Never forget them eyes! And I'll never forget the sound of that jaw crackin'—wow!"

"Who's the gent that tried to arrest

him?" Pasqual asked, jumping immediately to the point that interested him most.

"That fellow over there with the gray suit," a passenger said.

The men all appeared to be in gray, but Pasqual followed the pointing figure. The man was still in heated argument with the conductor.

"He's a deputy or a sheriff or something," one of the men said. "Wants the man for murder he committed back in New York. He sure botched it up. Had a gun, too, when he was dropped by that blow on the jaw. I heard it—everything. Looked through the curtains. There was this deputy lyin' cold, with his gun half fallen out of his hand. Didn't come to until after the train stopped."

"What stopped the train?" Pasqual asked. "That's what I'd like to know."

"Why, the murderer—he stopped it. Pulled the cord! We all thought they was to be a hold-up."

A brakeman who had joined the group spoke up: "Train was goin' forty miles an hour. The fellow was pretty wise not tryin' to drop off while she was under way—like some of these desperate criminals do!"

Leading his horse, Pasqual walked over to the conductor and the chunky man in the gray suit.

"Think I'm goin' to delay this train while you play hide-and-seek in that brush all day!" the conductor was saying irascibly. "You're crazy! If there was any sense to your orderin' me to hold up the train I'd do it. But there ain't. You can't catch him without you have men and horses. I'll telegraph to Mesquite and to Rawhide. They can start out with posses. As it is now your man's gone!"

The man with the broken jaw looked up at Pasqual and his horse. Speaking through his teeth and holding his chin, like one with a bad toothache, he said: "Who are you, sir?"

"Who am I?" the other rejoined dryly. "I'm Smoo Pasqual—on my way to Mesquite to hunt for a job in the mines. You-all are in trouble?"

"This man might help you," the conductor said. "But I don't figure one man can do much chasin' down a murderer.

Anyway, I'm through arguing." He turned to call forward: "All aboard!"

"Hold on now! Hold on!" the servant of the law cried distractedly. "We aren't leaving this spot, conductor until something's done! There's a reward for that man—ten thousand." He explained to Pasqual: "Killed a rich clubman back east—New York City, you know. *That's* what you can telegraph, conductor. And maybe this'll interest you, Mr. Pasqual, since you're the only man around here that can ride through this desert: The fellow pulled the cord, stopped the train, dropped off. One of the brakemen said he saw him running off down there into the brush. It's daylight. You ought to get him. He's not even armed."

"All aboard!" the conductor yelled again.

"Wait a minute, conductor," Pasqual himself said quietly. He turned again to the servant of the law: "Can I ask your name, mister?"

"Thorpe," the other answered through his teeth. "What's that got to do with it?"

"What's your business—if I may ask a question which we don't consider overpolite in these here parts?"

"I'm a member of the New York police. They set me shadowing this bird. He kept dropping off at little jerkwater stations and taking locals to every corner of the United States. Hell of a time I had keeping his tracks, too. I'll tell you. I made up my mind I'd nab him here in the middle of the desert, so's he couldn't give me the slip. There's the whole story. Now let's see you go after that ten thousand."

"If it's all the same to you, Mr. Cowboy," the conductor said ironically, "I'd like to start my train."

"Wait 'til I tell you, hombre, wait 'til I tell you!" Pasqual objected. "I ain't ready for no train to be pulled out yet." Again he turned to the other: "Can you put that in writin'—that thar point about the ten thousand?"

"I sure can," the detective said. He tore out a leaf from his notebook after writing:

If the bearer, who calls himself Pasqual, delivers to me the person of, or offers in-

formation leading to the arrest of James Chilton, of New York, wanted for the murder of Darril Morduant, I will pay to the said Pasqual a reward of ten thousand dollars.

Pasqual smiled. It was a smile that no one understood. He himself was wanted for several murders, and there was a price of ten thousand on his own head. He accepted the paper and tucked it into his hip pocket.

"Do you mind if I start the train now, Mr. Pasqual?" the conductor asked with biting sarcasm.

"I sure do!" the other answered.

"And who the hell may you be—to give me such orders?"

"Nobody 'cept that I know something you don't," Pasqual rejoined suavely.

"All aboard!" the conductor yelled hoarsely.

"Let 'em go aboard, but don't start the train," Pasqual said quietly.

The conductor looked up at the taunting smile on Pasqual's mouth. "Just what is it you know?" he asked uneasily as the passengers were clambering back to the train.

Pasqual lit a cigarette. "While I was trailin' along on the nearest way to Mesquite I had to cross the tracks. They was a ditch on the other side so's I had to walk my hoss on the ties for a spell, which I did, leadin' him by the bridle this-away. Then of a suddint I seen your headlights glarin' down sharp on the tracks. If it weren't for that I wouldn't have saw what I saw. The spikes of some of them rails a mile up the road thar has been loosed and likewise the fishplates."

"B'God! That means we'd have been wrecked!" the conductor exclaimed.

The smooth voiced Pasqual waved his lighted cigarette up the tracks:

"I reckon they's been road agents up that-away, gents. You don't find these cow-brutes or wild hoss cavies knocking out spikes and fishplates!"

The conductor, engineer, fireman and brakemen looked at one another mutely, then at the stranger.

"Lucky you happened to be riding along, Mr. Cowpuncher!" the conductor cried.

"I reckon it was!" Pasqual laughed quite jovially.

CHAPTER V.

THE THREE BELLIGERENT BRODELLS.

THAT afternoon the belated train drew into a cow-town on the southwestern part of the desert. A heavy man wearing a gray tweed suit, a wilted collar and a derby, stepped down from one of the coaches and asked the station agent to direct him to the nearest doctor. There was no doctor in Cob's Coulee, but there was a very reputable veterinary who had had considerable experience in treating broken bones and gun wounds during his forty years' practice in that locality.

Mr. Thorpe found the veterinary's shack sandwiched in between a saloon and a dance hall, and some time later he emerged with the lower half of his face bandaged.

He then hurried into a lunch wagon which was drawn up in the sand and rattleweed of a lot across the street. Here he ordered two raw eggs in a glass of milk. The old man who kept the wagon said that he could have a chuck of beef stewed, or chile and beans, or ham and coffee, but—"although Cobb's Coulee was a cow-town, it was next to impossible to get a glass of milk anywhere west of the Box-B outfit."

The old man suggested that if Mr. Thorpe had a broken jaw the best thing to drink was a prairie cocktail. "It'll keep you alive the rest of the day," he said, "and it's what every one takes in these parts when they can't chew."

"The next thing I want is the sheriff," Mr. Thorpe said after he had finished his cocktail, which consisted of several raw eggs in half a cup of Worcestershire sauce.

"Ain't no sheriff in these parts."

"No sheriff!" Mr. Thorpe muttered between his teeth. "A hell of a joint this is: no law, no doctors, no milk!"

"If some hombre busted your chin for you, pard, all as you have to do is to throw a gun on him. Ain't no law agin that in these parts. You're a heavy man, and I'm light, but we're free and equal, bein' all as we need is a trigger finger."

"I'll shoot him all right!" Thorpe growled. "But I got to find him first. What I'm after is an escaped criminal. I've got to have horses, men, a guide to go out there in the desert. The man dropped off the train halfway up there to Mesquite. And there's a reward for him—ten thousand—he killed a man back in New York."

"That bein' the case what you-all need to do is to find one of the Brodell brothers. They're the ones which keeps law and order in this county. The real sheriff he's up to Mesquite and no one pays much attention to him, bein' it's generally suspected he's under the thumb of a bandit."

"Where do I find these Brodell brothers?" Thorpe asked.

"Wall, generally speakin', you'll find Skeeter Brodell over to Pedro's place where he hangs out playin' stud or monte. Jack Brodell—he's harder to find. Sleeps all day, but at night you kin find him at the Grand Central Dance Pavilion, bein' he's sort of gentleman cowboy, which the cantina girls is all crazy about him. Perhaps the best one for to go on your man-hunt with you is Buckshot Brodell which, however, he's always drunk."

"That's sure sounds like a fine troupe to take out on a man-hunt!" Mr. Thorpe muttered scornfully. "Can't I get any one else to ride out there with me—some one I can rely on?"

"Rely on?" the old man laughed. "Ain't no one but the Brodell brothers in this town which you can rely on them. The others is all cow-punchers driftin' from one outfit to the other, rustlers most of 'em; and chulos. You can't tell if you-all got 'em out thar in the desert when they'd double-crost you and side up with the hombre you're after. Then, of course, they's a bunch of Papagoes, and a good heap of barkeeps—"

"Nothin' doin'!" Thorpe said desperately.

"And a lot of ole prospectors with white beards which has spent fifty years ridin' out there in Gold Pan Cañon and south with a gun and a burro and a—"

"Which one of the Brodell brothers can I find the quickest?" Thorpe interrupted impatiently.

"I reckon bein' Buckshot Brodell sleeps

off his drunk up until the middle of the afternoon, might you could find him easiest. Buckshot he's a particular friend of mine. See them windows?" He pointed to some broken, dust covered panes in the side of his chow-cart.

"Buckshot he done it. Busted my wagon all to pieces fightin' some Mexes who give me an argument. Now I'd like for to see him git that ten thousand reward. And ef it's all the same to you, pard, I'll haul him out'n his bunk over to the Commercial Hotel and tell him to meet you down in the vestibule. You ain't in a hurry."

"In a big hurry," Thorpe said. "My man is out in the desert right now probably hunting for a horse with which to cross the border."

"In that case I'll finish up these here dishes, wake Buckshot up and git him down in the vestibule of the Commercial Hotel which you'll find it down the street just acrost the dry wash."

"That suits me," Thorpe said. "Here's a cigar. Now then, where's this gambling joint you called Pedro's place?"

The old man pointed through the door of his cart. Thorpe saw a long, low shack whose façade of pine boards was painted with the sign: *Pedro McGinnis Gaming Parlor*.

It was a huge one-story shack with a bar running down the side which must have been, to Thorpe's astonished gaze, the length of a good sized New York City block.

"I'm looking for Skeeter Brodell," Thorpe said.

The barkeep, sweeping up the sawdust and sand of the floor, replied that Skeeter, having been in a brawl the night before, had overslept, but he could be sent for.

Thorpe seemed uncertain. He was not quite sure whether Skeeter Brodell was the man he wanted to see or not. "What I want is a deputy or somebody who has to do with your law and order. You ain't got a police force, I know that, but I want whatever is like it."

"Well, then, you want Skeeter Brodell," the barkeep said definitely. "And he ain't like a regular policeman either. He never stays out'n a fight. Oh, no. Don't think that. He horses into it no matter what it's

about, and sees that the right side wins. He's our combined sheriff and constable and judge in this here county. We got a regular sheriff, but—"

"Yes, I heard all about that."

"Anybody as axes for a sheriff, we always send him to Skeeter Brodell."

"There's an escaped criminal in the desert between here and Mesquite. A reward of ten thousand is on his head. I want this man Skeeter Brodell to get him."

"Ah, so that's it! Well, you sure are lookin' for the right man!" the barkeep said. "If it warent for Skeeter I'd be a dead man to-day. See them broken chairs—them gamin' tables—that 'thar heap of bottles I just swep' up? Skeeter—he done it! Bounced a gang of desperadoes he did. And they was goin' to carve me up for to make tamales. That's what they said. Law and order—that's Skeeter's right name."

"Do you mind getting him for me, and telling him to meet me in the lobby of the Commercial Hotel within half an hour?"

The barkeep was about to consent, and with great readiness it seemed, when he suddenly began scratching his head perplexedly. "The Commercial Hotel ain't got a lobby!" he blurted out. "All as it's got is a bunk-shed with a saloon in front."

"Tell him to meet me there," Thorpe said.

"I sure will!" the barkeep promised. "And I'll stay this, too, mister. If they's ten thousand offered as a reward for the capture of your man, I see where Skeeter boosts the gamblin' up good and high when he gits the money!"

"One thing else—where's this joint they call the Grand Central Pavilion?"

"Over acrost the wash," the barkeep answered. "You foller this street to where it leads down to the dry creek bed. Then it starts agin on the other side where they's a few shacks. Then acrost the street from the hotel—that's where the pavilion's at. But there ain't no dancin' there now—only between sunset and sun-up."

Mr. Thorpe ordered a drink which he poured with some difficulty between his bandages. Then, after treating the barkeep, he hurried down the street toward the dance hall.

"You want to see Jack Brodell, do you?" said the proprietor, a fleshy melting man in a Mexican sombrero. "Wall now, Jack he'd orter be here any minute. Rode up to Doc Pentigraw, the vet, for to have a knife wound fixed up. Jack he's a bit spoiled what with these gals around here allus gettin' him into fights. A Mex knifed him last night—because of a half breed solo dancer I got on my bill—a big drawin' card I'll tell you, mister. Come around to-night and I'll promise you a good—"

"Tell Jack to meet me at the Commercial Hotel soon as he gets back," Thorpe said. "I want him to go on a man-hunt!"

"Ah, so that's it! Wall now, we'll miss Jack. He plays the banjo in my joint and I will say he makes the place hum! Why don't you-all git one of his brothers? They'll do just as well."

"I don't doubt that!" Mr. Thorpe grumbled. "Didn't think I'd have to get a banjo-player to go after my man who happens to be a murderer. A drunk and a gambler, and a banjo-player—that sure does make a fine posse!"

"You don't mean to say you're axin' all three of 'em to go?" the proprietor of the Grand Central exclaimed.

"The man I want is a fugitive from New York. Killed a man back there. On the train a bit south of Mesquite he dropped off and disappeared in the desert. I'm figuring that if he's on foot we can catch him—"

"On foot! And you're sendin' all three Brodells after him! Wow! That's pretty good! If you-all had a whole band of outlaws all as you would need is one of the Brodells to git 'em, but here you go sendin' three after one man!"

"There happens to be a reward of ten thousand," Thorpe said.

"Ten thousand! Phooey! And for killin' a man! Wow! You'd think the poor coot had stolen a horse! Ten thousand and three Brodells!" The fat face sagged into a long expression of sympathy. "Why don't you give the poor hombre a chanst!"

"He happens to be a pretty dangerous man," Thorpe said. "See this jaw of mine? One blow did it."

The other nodded. "You ought to see

a man's jaw after Jack Brodell gets through with it!"

"Can I rely on you to send him to me?" Thorpe asked impatiently.

"You can. Jack—he runs out'n money pretty fast, and I reckon ten thousand won't do him no hurt. Nor me either for that matter, bein' I own this joint where he hangs out at. I'll send him."

As Thorpe had heard, the Commercial Hotel consisted in merely a long shack of bunk rooms with a saloon for a vestibule. He waited only a short while in the crowd of stockmen, Mexicans and prospectors in the saloon, before he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the street outside.

A moment later three big men banged open the swinging doors and thumped up to the bar.

The fat, heavy set gentleman with the bandaged face could not explain how it was that a card sharp, a whisky bum and a banjo player could inspire a man with fear by merely looking at him. But that is precisely what happened to Thorpe when he had his first view of the Brodell brothers.

CHAPTER VI.

A FLOCK OF BLOODHOUNDS.

THE lobby of the Commercial Hotel was well crowded by the time the Brodell brothers entered. And upon their entrance there was an immediate cessation of all other activities.

Stockmen got up from the gaming tables, Mexicans slunk respectfully into the back-ground, the line of men at the bar broke in the center, parting so as to give the brothers ample space. When those three "vigilantes" gathered together in one place it always meant trouble—or the climax of trouble.

"Hollo, Skeeter! hollo Jack! hollo Buck!" the men cried. "Ridin' to-day?" "What's up?" "Rustlers?" "Goin' to be a tight-rope ack somewheres?" "What's the meetin' for?"

"It's all about that fat tenderfoot with the busted jaw," some one explained disgustedly. "Got a grudge agin some one, and wants the whole State to git in on the trail!"

'Another added more explicitly: "An escaped gunman out'n New York is wanderin' around up in Mesquite desert. This here tenderfoot is a deputy from New York. He's sure doin' up his business brown!"

The barkeep—an ugly fellow with matted hair which gave the impression of hiding a big ear on one side and a scarred depression on the other—fawned obsequiously on the Brodells. He abruptly forsook serving his other guests and beamed upon the three heroes of Cobb's Coulee.

"How are you, Skeeter?" he asked deferentially. "How are you, Buck? How are you, Jack?"

"We're lookin' for a gent with a broke' jaw," Buck announced.

Thorpe elbowed his way toward them: "I figure I'm the man you're looking for, gentlemen. My name's Thorpe. New York police force. Let's have a drink all around."

"A drink on the house," the barkeep said. "Whenever a Brodell comes in here he drinks on the house." He poured the orders.

Buck Brodell, a heavy-set, bull-necked fellow with a mass of wavy black hair, a leathery face and bloodshot eyes, immediately ordered another round. "Powerful dry to-day!" he said huskily.

Skeeter, a lanky, rawboned man with a drooping rust-colored mustache, turned his clear brown eyes on the New York detective. Skeeter was considerably disappointed. He expected to find a man built on the heroic lines of a western sheriff. Instead he was looking down on a pudgy tenderfoot with a bandaged face and a derby.

The youngest of the brothers, Jack, was a well built boy with gleaming black eyes, a fine square jaw and an outfit of khaki and puttees. He looked at Thorpe for a moment, then burst out into a jovial laugh.

"Who busted you in the jaw, hombre?" he asked.

"The man we're all after," Thorpe replied. "I'll tell you—"

"Why didn't you bust him back so's he wouldn't wake up?" Jack laughed. "That's a good one lettin' a man get off to the desert and he didn't even have a horse! Don't you know he'll git sunstroke afore

you may git a chance to hit him back agin?"

"I seem to feel better!" the red-faced Buck Brodell said. "Let's set down and leave the gentleman tell us his troubles."

The crowd made way for them as they retired to one of the booths.

"It's this way, gents," Thorpe said, when they were gathered at the table. "It's not a secret. I'm on the force back in New York City. A man by the name of James Chilton plugged a member of one of them high-brow clubs. Then the same night—within a hour or two as near as could be figured, he bought a ticket for Chicago.

"Didn't go to Chicago. Knew he was shadowed. Jumped the train. We caught him again in Missouri by telegraphing everywhere. I was able to catch up with him because he kept gettin' off the overlands, taking side trips and such. When we got to Arizona I picked his trail up again in Phoenix. Easy to get his description.

"He's a tall fellow about your size," he nodded to Buck who was not as tall as the lanky Skeeter and not as short as the prepossessing Jack. "He's got gray eyes, brown hair, a long face with a long nose which ain't too straight. Got it broken playin' polo.

"He's got broad shoulders, and a long hand with a coat of tan and black hair on it. And there's a scar under his eye which makes him look like he's scowling. That's his description, gents."

Skeeter Brodell, who rarely spoke a word, nodded his head, rolled a cigarette and lit it. Jack, the man who preferred playing a guitar at the Grand Central to punching up the cattle of the Brodell outfit, reached over to a slot in the wall where he put in a nickel for the piano. He did a syncopated dance with his fingers to the banging ragtime. Buck Brodell ordered another drink.

"Now, then, gents, I don't know anythin' about this travelin' in the desert. I couldn't go out there with a horse and wagon and get anywheres. And they tell me you can't negotiate those desert roads in a car.

"But listen to this: the man's on foot! Get that? He dropped off the train be-

tween Mesquite and this burg. On foot! All you have to do is to ride out there, one heading south, the other north, the other straight east—and you've got him. And to make the whole joke easier, I'll tell you one thing more:

"When the train was stalled out there in the desert, there came ridin' along, a cow-puncher callin' himself Pasqual. I told him of the reward and he promised to get a posse together and ride down to meet you gents. What he'll do will be to chase the crook right into your mitts! And here's the happy ending: Ten thousand berries reward."

Thorpe looked at Skeeter's long, raw-boned, gloomy face. Skeeter cast back the same expression with which he would cover up a strong poker hand. Jack was obviously figuring out something in the beer-suds on the table. It turned out he was worrying about a complicated dance step which that half breed *señorita* over at the Grand Central had shown him the night before. Buck was finishing a drink, and became precipitously himself; boastful, genial, talkative:

"If you'd gotten me alone, Mr. Detective, everything would have been jake. I'd like to have ten thousand. But here you git these two fool brothers of mine. *Three* of us—to git one man! Holy cripes! I wouldn't be such a coward!"

Jack looked up from his problem in the suds: "Three mounted men after one on foot! It makes me turn red in the ears just blushin'!"

"This hombre you seen ridin' in the desert—what's his name? 'Pasqual?' All right, leave Pasqual do it!" Buck said. "Besides if the man killed somebody in New York, that ain't our business. We thin out the bad men here in this county—in particular them as rustles cows. Leave Pasqual git him; Pasqual and his posse."

"You don't mean you're goin' to refuse me!" the unhappy Thorpe cried, mumbling piteously between his teeth. He turned to the eldest brother, the lanky and poker-faced Skeeter. "Look here, mister, you ain't goin' to back down, are you? You ain't said anything! Will you go after this crook?"

Thorpe, as well as the two other brothers, waited expectantly for Skeeter's answer. It appeared that Skeeter's decision meant a lot in the minds of Buck and Jack.

Without changing the expression on that long expanse of red leather—which was his face—Skeeter nodded slowly.

"What and the hell, Skeeter!" Buck exclaimed.

"How come, Skeeter?" Jack cried disgustedly. "The hombre's on foot and this gent here has already siced a rider after him. What-all's the use of *us* ridin'!"

For the first time the taciturn Skeeter opened his mouth: "Where did your man drop off the train at?"

Thorpe answered readily: "Some ways west of Mesquite, near a valley which they call Goldpan Cañon."

"That's the answer," Skeeter said cryptically.

"What's the answer?" the two brothers asked.

"We're all three of us ridin'," Skeeter announced quietly.

"All right, that settles it," Buck answered without any question. "Another slug of this p'isin, Jo."

"How come we're ridin'?" Jack the more intractable brother asked.

"These here New York gunmen gettin' off the Santa Fe always heads south," Skeeter explained. "This hombre you're after—" he said to Thorpe, "will trail through Goldpan Cañon. Our cow-farm is at the mouth of Goldpan Cañon."

Jack Brodell got his brother's meaning instantly. He swore an oath and banged his fist on the table. "We're ridin'!"

Buck was slower in his mental processes. "How come?"

"Little maw's at the ranch all alone—'cept for some good-for-nothin' herders and their women-folk," Jack explained.

It was Buck's turn to swear, more volubly, more loudly. "By God, the gunman's headin' straight for her! Come on!"

Thorpe was still at a loss as to what it was that had brought such an abrupt change in the minds of the brothers. "Your mother?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"She ain't our real maw," Jack explained. "She's our sister."

"Holy smoke! Your sister! Right in the path of that hellbender!" the wily Thorpe exclaimed. "That's sure different! A young lady—ay? Well, gents, I'm advisin' you confidential: You git that man afore anything happens or you'll be sorry for!"

Skeeter gave the final command. "We'll ride to the ranch first, boys, tell maw, git fresh mounts, and trail it."

"All right, gents, I'm with you," Buck announced. He turned to Thorpe: "We'll have your man for you by sunrise."

"Unless he's found a horse," Skeeter objected.

"Then it's three to one," Jack said scornfully. "Damn' if I'd go on any fool ride like this—if it weren't for maw." He followed his eldest brother to the door.

The slowest one of the three, Buck, ordered a last drink. "What'll you have?" he asked of Thorpe.

"Anything but a prairie cocktail," the latter replied definitely.

Buck swigged down his drink and rolled his bull neck comfortably. "I'll have your man by midnight," he said. "Them two fool brothers of mine—they won't be any use to me. If it weren't for our little sister they'd be two tramps—both of 'em. Skeeter—he'd be a good-for-nothin' gambler. Jack—he'd be ruined by women-folk. They're only keepin' themselves and the country lawful because of *her*."

He accepted another drink and found himself surrounded by an admiring gang. According to his custom when in liquor and on the start of a man-hunt, he held up his huge, thick hand to see if it were steady.

The cow-punchers, muckers—and every one in the room, exclaimed in admiration. Buck grinned and nodded in satisfaction.

"I'll have him for you by nightfall," he said, bringing the promised time down to an irreducible minimum.

Shortly before the Brodell brothers started for the Box-B ranch on their man-hunt, the outlaw Pasqual had succeeded in gathering together the three henchmen who had deserted him. For some time they combed the thick mesquite in search of their

fugitive. Later in the day they found tracks in the fine alkaline silt. They were the tracks of a man on foot, and they led down into the Goldpan Cañon.

"He's got a good head start on us," Pasqual said, "but it looks easy now. The cañon will lead him down south to the Box-B outfit. He'll be out'n his head with sunstroke and thirst and hunger by the time he gits thar, and most like he'll stop at the ranch to refresh hisself, not knowin' that it's where the Brodell brothers live at."

"What if them Brodells make a mistake and catch you instead of this murderer we're trailin'?" one of the cautious henchmen asked.

It was a point very well taken. The other two henchmen likewise wanted to know the answer. "We ain't lookin' for no set-to with them Brodells, chief, you remember that."

"Of all the yellow-livered skunks I've ever rode with!" Pasqual cried. "Got scairt at a headlight shinin' on you up thar on the spur, and now you're lookin' for trouble with the Brodells. Why, the Brodells don't know us. I'll go up and shake hands with 'em any day. They'll thank us for chasin' the prisoner down into their hands. That's what. And they're sports enough to whack up on the reward—any one will tell you that."

The three henchmen, furtive-eyed, unhealthy wisps of men, appeared to be reassured. One of them followed Pasqual down into the cañon. The other two, in accordance with the chief's command, rode one on each rim of the cañon.

It was thus that late that afternoon James Chilton found this posse of four riders closing down upon him.

CHAPTER VII.

SANCTUARY.

AS Pasqual had prophesied, James Chilton found himself facing an unbeatable adversary—the desert sun.

Dropping down into the maze of gulches and arroyos which cross-hatched Goldpan Cañon, he found himself in a withering furnace of heat. He was shut in by sheer

walls of red rock, granite, porphyry, quartz, which radiated the sunlight.

The floor was a bed of salt through which he shuffled, leaving tracks which there was no wind to eradicate. If there were horsemen to pursue him, he reflected, he was as helpless in that wilderness of ravines as a fly in a web.

He had no covering for his head other than a cap—which he customarily wore when traveling. This was a pitiable protection against the rays blazing down through the thin desert air. His coat he had discarded. He was without a vest. His fine linen shirt was open at the throat; his tight-fitting trousers of worsted were ripped by cactus and mesquite thorn and rocks, as were his silk stockings and his low-heeled brogues.

Covered with alkali, besmeared with his own sweat, his face haggard from lack of food, his eyes colorless, blood-drained from his combat with that sun—he was a ferocious looking figure. The fact was any one who might have seen him stumbling, running, staggering down the hot cañon, would have seen at a glance that he did not belong in that country.

One thing, however, buoyed him up: it was a certain feeling of triumph. He had come to the Arizona bad lands to get that greatest of all thrills—the thrill that belongs to the pursued. He was helpless, hounded, fleeing all mankind. Whoever saw him—the stupidest cholo, a squaw, a greaser—would tell on him. Every human being was his enemy.

In his present state, he could fool no one. The mark was clearly written on him. He was carrying a brand! And the glorious part of it all was he felt that fearful excitement he had known when he was a boy and was a hare in hare-and-hounds.

The cañon grew deeper, hotter. He hesitated. The thrill of the fugitive could not be obtained without dangers. This was Arizona. This was the rim of the desert. He must not plunge and stagger along like a mad man. This peculiar exhilaration he felt meant a very serious danger: thin air, heat, hunger.

He stood for a moment on the beds of fine crystalline silt—looking like a gaunt

wolf. Mirages came up before him. It looked as if a hundred yards in front of him there were pools of sky blue water into which he could plunge—if he would hurry.

But to hurry now would be to succumb to panic. Although he was fleeing, he was so calm, so gaunt, his leaps so agile, his step so full, so steady in its swing, that he gave the impression not of flight, but of stalking prey. Across the sand beds, over the huge boulders in the dry bed of the creek, past rocky shoals, patches of tarweed, sage, creosote—he sped. But he was not fleeing!

Deeper and deeper the cañon fell as if into a gash cut through the heart of the desert, then abruptly the great granite walls widened, rolling out like the sides of a cornucopia and terminating in battlements of highly colored rocks.

James Chilton looked down into a vast demesne of flat grazing land, stretching away into a range of purple sierras. Just below the gentle slope which was the alluvial fan at the cañon's mouth, he could see the round corrals, the groups of calfsheds, bunkhouses and chowhouse of a ranch.

He paused again. The air was still, as clear as crystal although hot, and fragrant with the smell of sage. Far away the flat spaces and coulees were dotted with cattle. A buzzard was wheeling in the white sky. Then in that universe of soundless things, Chilton was aware of a certain rhythm. The air, he imagined, was responding to a vibration, as, for, instance, the vibration of the atmosphere on the edge of the hot rock where he was standing.

Presently it began to take on a recognizable form: the sound of galloping horses. He could hear the beating of hoofs on the rock slabs far up in the cañon. Now the sound was muffled, imprisoned perhaps in a ravine. Then as the horses crossed one of those stretches of sand the sound went out altogether. Now it came again, its echo thrown down sharply from the perpendicular walls. There was the sharp but still distant clatter of horseshoes striking granite slabs.

Chilton looked back. The cañon yawned. Since he had come down the sun had

slanted, splashing its light only on one of the stratified walls. Above on the cañon rim in the blazing but cooler light, there was a rider galloping along. Chilton could see him far off at a dizzy height—a speck against the white sky.

He looked across to the darker side. There on the rim was another rider, skirting the granite battlements, galloping now in the open, disappearing now behind the pepperwoods, sycamores, giant boulders. But the sound of the hoofbeats up there was lost before it came down to the base of the cliffs. The rhythmic clip-clop which Chilton heard came, he was certain, from the cañon itself. They were perhaps far away, for the sound was exaggerated by those walls as if through the horn of a phonograph.

Chilton plunged down the alluvial fan, keeping away from the glaring white stretches of sand. If he stayed as much as possible in the sage patches, his tracks would be harder to follow—and he could not be so easily seen against the black background by those pursuers up on the cliffs.

Of course, his first intention was to give that ranch a wide berth, skirt around it, making for the open plain, and trusting to luck that night would fall before the horsemen got his trail. But something happened which made him change his mind.

Far off toward what appeared to be the horizon, there were three black dots and a cloud of dun-colored dust following them. The cloud was moving—ever so slowly up toward the mouth of the cañon. It was only because of the excellent vantage-point that Chilton had been able to see them.

How far away they were he could not for the life of him tell. It takes years in that country of clear air, of distant sierras, of desert mirages, to gauge distance. It might have been five miles, it might have been twenty. Certain peculiarities in the strata of air have been known to magnify objects at a great distance so that they seem close at hand.

Whatever the distance was, Chilton could see that those three dots were slowly taking on the shape of horsemen. And he had the impression that they were coming toward him as fast as they could.

To go out there on the flat desert on foot and try to flee from those horsemen when there was no chance to hide except behind a clump of sahuaro—that seemed utterly nonsensical. Besides Chilton was exhausted. If he could not get a drink soon, he would drop before a gun touched him. There was the alternative of retreating into the cañon and hiding in some side draw.

But those hoofbeats back there were now getting alarmingly loud. That was another point of distance which he could not calculate. The thin air and the steep rock walls played their tricks. Of course, he might crawl up into one of those narrow barrancas, where when cornered he could fight off a posse of men. But there was a very serious objection to that! How could he fight them off?

He had a revolver—but what good did it do him? He might as well have been disarmed. He was in the position of a man who is pursued but who is unable to strike back at his pursuers. He could wound them—and fight them off that way, yes. But could he measure his shots with such accuracy? What if he killed some one?

There was the one point that spoiled his whole game! He was not a desperado. He was not really fleeing the law. He was only playing a game? And one of the rules of the game was this: although any man could kill him, he himself could kill no one!

For some reason this made his flight all the more exciting. There was no pretense to the danger. The whole county would be chasing him before long, and any man who saw him could fire upon him without fear of the law, without fear of Chilton himself.

In plain terms there was only one thing to do—and that was to flee!

He decided immediately upon the next course. He would go into that cow-ranch, hide there until nightfall, and then get a horse, hold up some one for a grub outfit, and hit for the border.

He plunged into the mesquite brush, scrambled along down the banks of the alluvial fan and discovered a deeply cut creek-bed which took him to the edge of the fan. Here he found himself on the open plain, while not a hundred yards away was the outermost corral of the ranch.

The place appeared deserted of human-kind. There were sheds of dry, warped wood, flat bare stretches, a field of alfalfa, a windmill, a group of houses. In a corral some horses watched him—the strangest figure they had ever seen wander into the Box-B outfit. In another corral there were calves, watched jealously and mooded at by their mother cows on the other side of the barbed wire.

A Mexican woman—the exact counterpart of that flabby, flat-faced cook Chilton had seen in the New York restaurant—was flattening out mealcakes on a slab with which to make tortillas. Chilton passed her, keeping behind a long, low bunkshed. He reached another shed which lay between the alfalfa patch and the main ranch house.

A large, nondescript animal, which they called a jack-dog down there in the Cobb's Coulee ranges, set up a frantic barking. To avoid it, and to avoid being seen by any one popping out of those sheds, Chilton vaulted into the open window of the shack.

It was a dusty, dim place with the agreeable smell of chaff. There was likewise the stronger, still more agreeable odor of onions and chile. He looked about. The place seemed like a store room. The sun slanting through the spaces between the boards of the western wall made long planes of light that cut the room into innumerable, equal parts.

Bits of harness, leather riatas, lassos, branding irons with a square boxing an inverted "B," a pile of potato sacks, cans of oil—these were the details that met his disappointed gaze. What he had really hoped to find in that supply was something to drink—and something to eat.

That odor of onions came from the next shed. If that jack-dog had only barked a moment later Chilton might have leaped through the kitchen window instead of into this mess of saddles and saddle soap. He turned to the window.

On the instant of turning his face in that direction he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. Uncertain enough he was of it because the light of the window hit him with a glare. But he thought he had seen the peak of a sombrero in the act of ducking out there just behind the sill.

He leaped behind the door, drew his revolver, and held it with the muzzle in his hand, the butt outward. There he waited. He could not be seen from the window now. And if the owner of that sombrero tried to enter through the door, Chilton was in a good position to drop him with a blow on the head.

As he had expected, the latch on the door moved.

Chilton balanced his gun, stepped back so that the door in opening would not be shoved against him. He barely jumped away in time, for the door banged open smartly.

In the flood of light there was the instantaneous picture of a glistening six-gun, a slight arm, of the rim of a sombrero. In the brief moment while the eyes of the person out there were dilating to the darker scene, Chilton had the advantage. His hand darted out, clutched the slender wrist, pulled it inward with a flip so that its owner spun into the room, dropping the six-gun with a clatter.

Jim Chilton crushed a slender, fragile thing in his arms; clapped his hand on a soft red-lipped mouth; brushed a sombrero from a head of silken ringlets.

She struggled like a bird in a net. She tried to scream, but he pressed his palm tightly against the writhing lips.

Chilton felt a sudden qualm of astonishment, chagrin, sweep over him. He had expected a life and death tussle. Here instead was a girl helpless in his embrace.

"Don't resist," he commanded softly. "I will free you. Don't try to fight me off. Don't scream. I am going to take my hand from your mouth."

She looked at him. His face was bent close to hers. She saw his eyes—intensely clear—as if burning into her with a fierce gray light. She felt his arm encircled about her, crushing her to him so that his heartbeats seemed strangely close—as if they were her own!

She weakened. It was as if a drug had worked upon her, nullifying her will, taking away the power of her limbs. To Chilton it appeared as if the girl sank forward toward him. He was holding her—as if to keep her from falling.

That was a strange culmination to their combat—an embrace, to which the girl succumbed!

He released her then; took his hand from her mouth. They separated, stood staring at each other, both wide-eyed, abashed, yes, even frightened. The girl did not scream. Instead she looked at him, her face flushed crimson, her eyes flaming, her lips parted to regain her breath.

The bands of light, made white now from the rising dust, cut across her tall agile body. One of the beams lit upon her mouth. It was a courageous mouth. Her eyes were clear, flaming, her face thin and burned by the desert wind—all those details which Chilton saw in that first bewildering combat of glances, formed the defiant face of a frontier girl.

Defiant, yes; until she saw Chilton's first move. And then her defiance melted. She saw a gesture which at first she could not believe, which left her wondering just what sort of a man this was whom she was facing.

He had reached to the floor, picked up her six-gun and was now holding it outward with handle toward her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN'S PITY.

SHE stared at him with an expression of utter bewilderment, incredulity. There was no possible clew, no memory from her past, by which she could discover just what sort of a man she was facing.

There he stood, powerful, gaunt, fierce. Her wrist ached from that one inexorable clutch and twist. He looked as if he could have fought ten men. And yet he was not husky like many of the herders on her ranch.

The neck revealed by the opened shirt appeared straight, graceful, without the touch of brutality that you always see exaggerated in the necks of powerful men. His throat, in fact, gleamed white down to the rough, big chest.

From there she glanced up to the pale, fierce eyes. She was not afraid.

The quick, intense appraisal resolved itself into one question: "Who are you?"

Although as surprised as she was at this encounter, he seemed perfectly composed. He was in rags—yes. But some miracle seemed to have taken place. She was not facing a cornered renegade. She was facing some other type of man—just what type she did not know. She saw him remove his cap—a peculiar gesture in a moment of such stress.

"I made a very regrettable mistake," he said. "I cannot understand how such a thing happened: you see all I knew was that a hand was thrust in that door with a gun bearing upon me. Of course, I lunged for it—"

The girl was all the more bewildered. Why had he ducked into that shack in the first place? He might probably confess himself a tramp. But there were no tramps in that country, properly so called. The nearest thing to it was the type of drifters called *renegadoes*, but they never tramped. They always rode on something. Plenty of broncs for the asking.

Then again he looked more like a gambler. But what was that curious woolen thing he had just removed from his head, that thing with a visor like the green shades the gamblers wore at Pedro's place? She had never seen a cap. Yes, a gambler he might have been.

He had a poker face—like Skeeter Brodell's. He had shoulders like Skeeter's brother, Buck; and hair like Jack Brodell. He seemed a composite of all three and yet he was as unlike them as a race horse is to a cow pony.

What could he be doing out there alone, on foot with tattered clothes, without so much as boots to tuck his trouser legs in? What was he doing wandering round there, stumbling into a cow farm on the desert rim?

An escaped criminal, of course! That was the answer! And yet the girl rejected this almost immediately. She was riveting her eyes upon him. That was one thing she was satisfied about. He was not a criminal.

"Who are you?" she asked again. "What are you doing here? Why did you hide in here—when my dog barked at you? You were afraid of the dog?" Her lips

curled. She checked a half scornful smile. "Oh, no, it wasn't the dog that brought you in here. You were afraid of that old Mexican making tortillas." She jumped to another question: "Where's your horse?"

"I beg your pardon, madam, but I have no horse."

"No horse and you've been in the cañon!" This definitely increased her alarm and suspicion. "Then I guess I was right: you're on the wing!"

He had a way of smiling graciously as if pleased with every word the girl said: "You are right, I am on the wing. That explains my brutal action just a moment ago. I cannot tell you how desperately ashamed I am—taking you like that in my arms!"

It seemed as if she hoped he would put up some sort of defense, but he stood there, saying nothing.

"What happened to your horse in the first place?" she asked.

"Pardon me, I had no horse."

Then he was going to lie to her! No horse? Preposterous! Every one had a horse in that part of the country. Or perhaps, she reflected, this was one of those unfortunate men who tried to negotiate the sandy county roads with a car? He shook his head in answer to her question:

"No car either. Just walked."

"You're a very strange man," she said in a tone of accusation. "There is no doubt in my mind that you are on the wing. What do they want you for?" Her voice had softened suddenly. "No, of course, you won't answer a question like that." She thought a moment. "I could scream. You would be taken in a jiffy—perhaps hit—that is, if you put up a fight. And yet—"

It was Chilton's turn to smile.

"At least this much is clear: I'm your prisoner." He seemed to say this as if a great load had been taken from his mind.

She fingered the six-gun nervously, uncertainly, as if she were wondering how in the world it had come into her hand. She had pointed it at him—a fact which now struck her as ridiculous. And then with a fine air he had returned it to her!

A very strange man he was; a man who

frightened her; a man who numbed her will; who fascinated her. For instance, she was afraid to go to the door. She was convinced he would check her—perhaps reach out his hand and clutch her wrist again, and whirl her into his arms.

But she made an effort. She felt she must get away somehow—and as quickly as possible. He anticipated her move and checked her, but in a very different way.

"Can I say a word before you go?"

That was a peculiar way of talking. The ranch folk never spoke that way. His speech reminded her of a sky-pilot who had taught her to speak a brand of English rarely heard in the cattle country. This stranger had a trick of modulating his voice, so that it seemed eager and tense without being louder than a whisper.

Her heart leaped. The fact was she knew he could frighten her by merely a word, a gesture of the finger. She had never, to the best of her memory, been afraid of men before. Not even when her brothers brought a notorious outlaw from the cañon one time, whom they were going to hang. That outlaw had inspired her only with pity. But this man—

"Yes, I am cornered," he confessed.

Her face went pale. For a reason which she could not for the life of her have explained, she put her hand to her heart.

"Not only pursued, but cornered," he went on. "There are riders coming across the plain. And four more coming down from the cañon. You see I—"

He paused abruptly, catching some sort of perplexity on her face—a handsome, sun-tanned face alive with emotions. "Are you doubting what I'm telling you?" He asked.

She was indeed shaking her head slightly—not nodding—but shaking it in denial:

"*You aren't a road agent,*" she announced definitely.

"I am glad you think that," he said.

"Perhaps you killed a man in a just fight."

"If you believe that much, you will probably be in sympathy with me, thinking me pursued and yet innocent."

"Pursued and yet innocent," she repeated as if the phrase frightened her. She

changed her tone and demanded coolly. "You first tell me the truth."

What could he say? He could confess that he was pursued, yes; that he had dropped off the train at the top of Goldpan Cañon, that he was wanted for murder. All that she would know soon enough anyway. That much he could confess. But could he tell her the whole truth? Could he say that he was merely carrying the blame of a murder on his own shoulders—in order to save a friend? To divulge that would mean the ultimate defeat of his whole game.

"Unfortunately I cannot tell you the truth."

She could not understand why it was she wanted to be on this man's side—against the law. And yet she persisted: "If I knew the truth, do you think I would let you be taken?"

"I beg of you not to ask the truth—now. I will tell you everything when I can."

"You killed a man then?"

He did not answer.

"Yes, that is certain. They want you for murder."

"They want me for murder," he repeated.

She lifted her face, moved closer to him. She spoke in an anxious tone, as if eager for him to defend himself: "Did you kill a man in a just fight?"

"That I will tell you—when the time comes. If you will only believe! I can't explain now! It's something I'm fighting for—and I can't tell you what it is without losing the fight. All I ask is that you believe in me—for only a short while. Then I will prove myself."

The girl's heart was pounding like a frightened bird's. It was a strange, an exquisite, fear standing there with a hounded man beseeching her for mercy. She tried to fortify her lips again with that scornful smile. But her thin, delicately molded face was too vivid, agile. The man looking down at her could read it.

"Why are you afraid?" he asked.

"I'm not afraid. That is, not of you."

"Afraid of what then?"

She spoke up bravely now: "It seemed

so grim, horrible—being trailed for murder—coming *here* of all places!"

"It seems to be the luckiest turn of fate that ever happened to a man!" he said with a touch of chivalry.

"I don't know about that!" she replied. "This is a country without law and order, except for three men who keep it safe. If you had stumbled into any other ranch—a Mexican *xacalli*, a Papago hut, anywhere, they would have hidden you—for a little money. There are only three men on this whole range who will stop a bandit. And those three men are my brothers!"

Chilton smiled. The announcement appeared to have little effect on him. "Yes, I see—I see why you thought it something of a joke—my coming here. Very unfortunate."

"And they'll get you, there's no doubt about that!" the girl said. "They have never failed—those three big brothers! Every one is afraid of them—saloonmen, gamblers, *cholos*, rustlers, yes—and the sheriffs, too, are afraid! The sheriffs are crooked—my brothers aren't. You have no chance. It's no use. I could help you if I dared—but they'd win. I couldn't help you against *them*—even if I dared!"

She put out her hand impulsively, then drew it back. There was a violent conflict in that one gesture. This man was going to fight her brothers—perhaps kill them. And she pitied him!

"If you dared—" he repeated the words as if they had a pleasant taste.

"I will dare! How can I let them kill you!"

He could not help but sense the immeasurable pity in that outburst. It was the pity of a woman who looked upon a condemned man—a woman whose whole soul rebelled at the thought of life being taken away.

Then came the sound of horses clopping over the stones.

He looked to her. He appeared absolutely confident that she would not give him up.

Her face flamed. She had lost her sense of fear—at least momentarily. She had been like an animal which, in the presence of a frightened human being, becomes

afraid itself. But now the sound of those hoofbeats changed everything: he was the one to be afraid. She was the one to be merciful.

"I must suggest only this—" he said. Although obviously at bay he spoke with an unruffled coolness. "If I am to fight off a band of riders it would be best that you leave this shack before the siege begins."

He bowed to her as he thrust the door open.

She stepped hurriedly toward it. When she saw the approaching horsemen her heart began to pound. She had the memory, the

sensation of his heart pounding against her when she was in his arms. This cornered renegade, this ragged stranger being trailed for murder—had taken a Brodell woman in his arms and crushed his palm against her mouth!

The just thing was to turn him over to that posse. But the girl acted in contradiction to her better judgment, to law and order, to her brothers who were the pillars of law and order.

"I won't let them find you," she whispered above the pounding rhythm of her heart.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



THE URGE OF THE PRIMITIVE

I'M weary of "society,"
I've played Bridge to satiety,
I thirst for real variety,
Some "back to nature" stunt.
I'm tired of movies and the play,
I loathe *bon mots* and repartée,
I long to go to grass—and stay!
To browse, and root, and grunt.

No doubt it's asininity,
But—how I crave bovinity!
I feel a wild affinity
For clover and a cud.
Just think—a calm lactiferant,
Untroubled, unvociferant
With "Moo!" one's note indifferent,
One's toes in cool soft mud!

I'm through with frocks aërial;
In place of garb ethereal
I'd love that tan material
A Jersey's frame adorns.
To graze in sweet vacuity
(My lean sides getting suet-y),
In blessed perpetuity—
I *know* I'm sprouting horns!

What joy, what heavenly happiness,
To just indulge one's nappiness!
The world and all its scrappiness
Could go to—well—could wait;
While one in lovely laziness,
Forgetting all earth's craziness,
Deep in a meadow's daisiness
Could doze and ruminate!

Julia Boynton Green.



Vingo's Lady Serpent

By LORING BRENT

Author of "Vingo's Roving Romeo," "Vingo's Mysterious Stranger," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

SHUCKS, no; Vingo wasn't a paradise in the sense that flowers and luscious fruit grew there all year round, or that rivers of milk and honey flowed down the middle of golden streets. Paradise is generally a state of mind, anyhow. It's like happiness, grief and other high voltage emotions—a comparison between what was and what is or what's next.

A man with both legs smashed can be the happiest fool on earth when he learns he isn't, after all, going to cash in, just as a man who has inherited a million dollars can be the unhappiest when the only girl in the world coldly and flatly says no. Nope; Vingo is no botanical paradise. Malaria lurks in the bushes and hookworms live in the soil; there are rattlesnakes on the high ground and water moccasins and alligators on the low; but in spite of these natural disadvantages, Vingo was, before Alvina

Barnes came along, about as peaceful and contented as any town has a right to be. Yes, sir. On that basis, Vingo was a paradise until Alvina came and gave us a gorgeous view of Hades with the doors wide open.

From the outset of our acquaintance I had good and sufficient cause to associate Alvina Barnes, or Viney, as she was known to a devoted few, with snakes and other dangerous reptiles. She was one of the most beautiful young women I ever knew, and I have often wondered if maybe Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, Katherine de Medici, and Lucretia Borgia didn't have the same kind of eyes and the same capacity for starting trouble by doing nothing but being among those present. Loosely speaking, there are just two kinds of women, the kind that would make men purr if they were cats, and the kind that would make them arch

their backs and puff out their tails and raise particular hell. One kind brings out the good side, and the other kind brings out the bad. Alvina Barnes's effect on men was just as soothing and elevating as raw corn liquor.

The afternoon Alvina Barnes came into my easy-going, uneventful life I was down on my hands and knees looking under the Vingo commissary at a six-foot blacksnake that had crawled there and was glaring out from the brownish gloom of rotting timbers at the world in general and my two fox terriers in particular. Peggy and Timmy were trying to bark the blacksnake into a state of hysterical abandon, which was a technique they employed for attacking anything from a mallard duck to a Mallet locomotive, but the big snake only glared at them coldly and wickedly.

It was so dark under the commissary that nothing could be seen but his eyes, shining out like gems, and so far apart that I thought at first the dogs had cornered a young alligator. They were yapping and snarling, rushing in and dancing back, their little black noses shining with the dew of excitement. I was about to get up and look around for a pole when I heard some one laugh behind me.

It was Viney Barnes. In a red dress that clung to a figure that a poet would have called divine, she stood there. I suppose a decent woman would have called it a shameless dress. It seemed to be plastered to her, and it brought out every seductive line and enticing, soft curve of her slim, beautiful body. I didn't notice her eyes then; I was too busy watching her arms. They were fascinating arms, long and tapering and flexible, and as white as leaf-lard. They were white snakes, and she was waving them around.

"What is it—a 'gator?" she asked in a voice that almost made me jump.

I must tell you about that voice. It was as sweet as the low notes on an expensive fiddle. It was pure music, full of rich overtones and mellow undertones. It made you shiver and breathe deep. It was as if you had been listening for that voice all your life and were a little scared when you finally heard it. Does that mean anything to

you? I can't explain it any clearer than that. The voice was simply a part of her; it went with her white rose skin, her perfect white teeth, her masses of dark red hair—titan, do they call it—and her beautiful hands and feet.

"No," I answered, "it's only a blacksnake."

She became more excited than ever. Not scared, but excited. You know how most women are about snakes; they squeal and run into the nearest pair of male arms at sight of a reptile. Not Alvina Barnes. She squealed, but not because she was scared, and certainly she didn't run into the nearest pair of male arms. I almost wish she had. Not many men are privileged to embrace so much at one time.

I forgot the blacksnake, watching her. Her animation was a delight. She was never still. She couldn't sit or stand in any one place longer than a few seconds at a time. It was pure restlessness. When I came to know her better, and realized the depths of deviltry in her, I likened her to one of these unhappy spirits that are condemned to move on and on through eternity, never stopping, never resting, but hurrying, hurrying blindly, as if the devil himself was prodding them with a red hot pitchfork, as perhaps he is.

She kneeled down to look under the commissary.

"I can see its eyes!" she cried. "It's a big one! It's a whopping big one!"

She sprang to her feet as lightly and as gracefully as if she had been lifted up by a puff of wind.

"Let's kill it!" she squealed. "Come on, let's kill it! Get a club. Sick 'im! Sick 'im! Atta pup!"

I looked madly around for a stick. Even the fox terriers caught the spirit of her—that wild, contagious excitement that was never far below her skin, and they snarled and yelped and dashed closer to the snake than they had dared under my half-laughing commands.

Alvina tore off a frond from a cabbage palmetto—one of a row I had planted and was tenderly nursing—and with the dogs yipping beside and in front of her poked the large rattling leaf in the snake's face.

That moved him. Suddenly the two dogs dived under the commissary and their yelps came out, muffled.

"He's coming out the other side!" Alvina screamed. And waving the frond she raced around the end of the building.

She reminded me of movies I had seen of the French mob that churned through the streets of Paris after the nobility had been overthrown and the revolution was in full swing—a long snake of wild-eyed men with cleavers and axes and prancing women with butcher knives cutting down every aristocrat they found—the poor devils. It may seem strange that Viney Barnes should have reminded me of that, and yet I think you'll agree, when you've heard a little more about her, that it wasn't.

When I reached the sandy ground on the other side of the commissary, she and the fox terriers and the snake were having it out. If you have ever seen a snake-and-dog fight, you don't have to be told that the next few minutes were pretty lively ones.

The red-haired girl was keeping up the dogs' excitement by screaming at them, and the snake had been reduced to the state of ineffectual rage that the dogs had hoped for. It was striking at them; it was striking furiously at the frond Alvina slapped it with; it was even striking at bunches of grass.

"Sick 'im! Sick 'im!" she was screaming, over and over.

The dogs were darting in and snapping; and the snake's skin was bruised in a dozen places, and it was tiring.

Well, I had seen those pups kill blacksnakes before, and I always encouraged them, for blacksnakes are egg-suckers, and they are chicken killers; but I suddenly lost my enthusiasm for that fight. And it was watching Alvina that made me do it. Down in Mexico I had seen fashionable and beautiful *señoritas* act that way when a bull was goring a horse, and their excited gloating always made me much sicker than the condition of the horse. It was that same sort of feeling that came over me now as I looked at that beautiful red-haired, white-skinned girl.

I saw that she was simply enjoying the

cruelty of it, prancing around and screaming. For she was cruel, with her eyes like flashing diamonds. They were of a gray so pale that they were almost colorless; sometimes I caught a glint of pale-blue or of pale-green flashing in them; and it was her eyes, I think, that gave her away, for there was nothing bad or sinister in her face.

Some time after the blacksnake had stopped struggling, and lay stretched out, limp, with its back broken in five or six places, the dogs continued to charge it and snap at it. But presently the girl whistled, and the dogs whirled about and faced her with their ears straight up and quivering, their shiny black noses in the air, their little eyes gleaming like polished black coals.

I wish I could tell you sensibly and rationally just why I shivered at the sound of that whistle. It was not because it had caused those dogs to do a thing that I, their owner and master, had never been able to make them do, short of a whipping. They would have torn the dead snake until they were exhausted. But at the sound of Alvina's whistle, they had stopped. That, of course, was astonishing.

Have you ever tried to imagine what the sound of Pan's pipes would be? I know it would resemble Alvina's whistle—a thin, tantalizing, melodious, quivering sound, not of this world. It made those dogs snap to attention, and it made me shiver. And if you know fox terriers, you will know that it was not an ordinary whistle. They were not tired; and they were "hot," as the animal men say. Moreover, they were spoiled, unmanageable little beasts. The backwoods of Florida is a bad place to bring any well bred dog; the call of the wild is too strong.

Well, there was a big hog in the field of broom sage across the road that runs from the commissary to my house, and Alvina, thirsty for more excitement, saw the hog.

"Sick 'im!" she cried, and the dogs streaked into the sage grass with her after them.

A moment later I heard the hog grunting in panic, and I started across the road to stop what I fully realized would be an assassination. I knew that hog well. It be-

longed to old man Clayburn, and was, as sows go, well behaved and mannerly, the mother of several large litters, and the prospective mother of still another.

You would not suppose that two dogs as small as fox terriers could kill an animal as large as a full-grown sow; but their methods were satanic. They had learned early in their dealings with other animals that a joint frenzied attack repeated sufficiently would eventually drive any animal, no matter how large and powerful, into a helpless, baffled rage. I had seen them drive a longhorn Florida bull, mad with the September heat, round and round a dried swamp until the beast fell down with exhaustion. And I had seen them similarly wear out razorback after razorback—and a Florida razorback is as dangerous a customer, almost, as a wild boar, so hunters have told me. And I will have to confess to a certain responsibility.

The Florida fence laws were legislated by the cattlemen of the State; if your land is not properly fenced and cattle or hogs break through and destroy your crops, you have, under the law, no redress. The fox terriers soon learned that I approved of their attacks on cattle and hogs that had broken through my fences; but they did not understand why cattle and hogs outside my fences should not be fair prey as well. The time came when, unless I chained them up, they spent their days and nights ranging—assaulting any animals they could find; and I had just about decided to sell them or give them away when Alvina Barnes came to Vingo and took the problem off my hands.

When I crawled through the rusted wires into the broom sage field, Alvina, the dogs, and the sow were already at the other end. I could not see the dogs or the sow, but over the waving tops of the sage, the girl's shoulders, in the clinging red dress, and her head were visible, and her hair was down and waving about her shoulders in a wild, dark banner. The sow was grunting and squealing, Alvina was shrieking, and the dogs were yelping like mad. I shouted to her to call off the dogs, but she either did not hear or did not care to hear. And when I reached the end of the field, the four of them were zigzagging down toward

the other end, but the sow was grunting less loudly.

And suddenly a chill trickled down my back. She had whistled again—that eerie, haunting whistle that sounded as the pipes of Pan must sound if they are ever heard. I knew that Clayburn's old sow was dead. The dogs had stopped yelping. The sow had stopped grunting and squealing. Somehow that whistle belonged to death, and it did to the very end.

The hog was lying on its side, not moving a muscle, when I reached the end of the field; and the two dogs were standing as I had seen them when she had whistled at the death of the big bull blacksnake, ears erect, eyes agleam, white bodies tense, saliva sliding off their pink tongues.

Alvina Barnes wasn't sorry. No, she was never sorry for any harm she did, and death in any form didn't seem to disturb her in the least. Her white rose skin was stained an even shell-pink, her round, small breasts were rising and falling rapidly under the tight red dress, her pale eyes were shining. She laughed softly.

"Some dogs, mister," she remarked in that melodious voice.

I prodded the sow with my boot.

"You've killed this hog," I told her.

"What do I care?"

"It's going to cost you twenty dollars, anyhow," I said, angrier than ever because I knew it wasn't true. I was the one who would have to pay for the sow; it was my damn fool dogs that had done the actual murdering.

She laughed and snapped her fingers.

"Are these your dogs?" was her impudent answer. And when I nodded, she said: "Well, then, you must be the sheriff and the game warden and the storekeeper and the postmaster I've been hearing about. If you only had the halo around your head, you'd be just as important in this place as—"

"What are you going to do about this hog?" I snapped.

She put her hands on her slim, round hips and grinned at me.

"My! Ain't you mad, sheriff! I'll just bet you don't love me a little bit. I've sort of corrupted the community, haven't I?"

She came a little closer, and flung up her head with the same kind of smile and the same impudent little gesture that I've seen those Mexican *señoritas* use on young fellows they're kidding along. Her head came about up to my chin, and all of a sudden the dead hog, the fox terriers, and her own part in the crime went completely out of my head, and I wasn't aware of anything except that this strange, wild girl—for I didn't know yet who she was—was a tantalizing beauty.

"But don't you reckon, sheriff," she went on in that melodious, slurring voice, "that you could maybe learn to love me a little bit? Listen, won't you make me a present of these two dogs? I've been longing all my life to have a pair of matched dogs like them. Will you, sheriff?" she crooned.

I knew she was poking fun at me, but—Well, maybe you can't see what I saw or feel what I felt.

"They're yours," I said. "Would you mind telling me now who you are?"

"Why, I'm Alvina Barnes—Jeff Barnes's sister. We came in last night and we're renting that house down beyond Big Cypress."

It wasn't strange that I hadn't heard. I was on the outs with the negroes for putting in force a few game laws relating to wild turkey and quail, and the Vingo grapevine telegraph wasn't working as it usually did. That was their way of letting me know that they were peeved.

I knew the house well. It stood away off by itself in a thick pine hammock, and had always impressed me with its loneliness. The negroes said it was haunted; Old Uncle Dan Vickus had seen ha'nt lights—big blue and pale-orange ones—floating out of the windows one night and sailing straight out over the trees. Previously he had been sitting on the steps of the house, waiting for his hounds to tree a raccoon near by, and a very tall, strange negro had walked up and sat down beside him; and when Uncle Dan spoke to him, the tall, strange negro had simply dissolved. But Uncle Dan had bad eyesight, and anyway I didn't credit any of the Vingo ghost stories. Shucks, any house that stayed un-

occupied for six months was always haunted—to them.

Thinking of that had cleared my mind a little, and I said:

"What are you going to do about this sow, Miss Barnes?"

"Who owns her?" she wanted to know.

"Old man Clayburn," I told her.

"Where does he live?"

"Over on the Tomoka—about four miles—that way." And I pointed south.

"I'll talk to him," she said. "Nobody is going to pay for this hog. Listen, sheriff. Don't worry. You gave me these pups just after they killed the snake. And you're not mad at me any more, are you?"

"No," I answered; "of course not." And I meant it—because I was looking at her and she was grinning at me when I said it. And I knew that she would not pay for old man Clayburn's sow. I never saw the man who would not do exactly what Alvina Barnes wanted him to do.

She told me she wanted some rations, and we walked over to the commissary, she talking all the way, rapidly, without a sign of the embarrassment that most backwoods girls show when they talk to strangers. Well, Alvina wasn't exactly a backwoods girl, I soon found out. She said the fight between the black snake and the fox terriers was one of the prettiest fights she had ever seen.

"And I've seen some pretty fights, too," she went on. "Once when my brother and I were in New Orleans we took in a scrap between a wild cat and a bulldog—one of these English pit dogs with the long faces and close-set eyes. It was fine, but the police had to butt in and break it up just when it was getting real exciting. I reckon the bulldog would have won if they hadn't spoiled the party, but you could hardly tell one apart from the other after the first few minutes—and such howling and snarling and hissing and yowling I never heard!"

"You like that sort of thing, don't you?"

"I love it," she said.

"I don't see how a girl like you can find much interest or entertainment in a place like Vingo."

"Well," she explained, "it's a funny thing about me. I can be as happy as a

bird with just these two dogs. Before I met them I was beginning to wonder myself. What're their names?"

"Peggy and Timmy."

"Brother and sister?"

"No; I bought them for breeding. They're pedigreed stock—registered."

She nodded. "Oh, I could smell that."

"You could—what?" I gasped.

Alvina snapped her fingers, and Timmy almost turned a somersault.

"I can see things and smell things and hear things," she said in a deep, dreamy voice, "ordinary people can't. Did you see the puff of pale green smoke go out of that snake's mouth the very second it died?"

"Stop kidding me," I said.

For a moment she looked at me as if she were angry. Then she shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

"Well, sheriff, people do say I have an unusual sense of humor." And she laughed. But I didn't.

She was swinging her arms freely as she walked and occasionally, by accident or design, one of her hands brushed mine.

Now I am not susceptible to every pretty girl I meet, but I will have to admit that by the time we had reached the commissary, I wasn't thinking of anything but how it would feel to wrap Alvina in my arms and kiss her on those blood-red lips; and she knew it, too. I have always thought that women as a whole are given credit for intuition that they don't possess; some are more and some are less sensitive to passing feelings and emotions in other people, and Alvina was simply, decidedly of the former class. She could catch, or register, zephyr changes in the mood of a man, and in her possession this ability was a dangerous weapon.

I am sure she knew what I was thinking as we went up the steps to the commissary porch and I pulled open the screen door for her. She was grinning up at me, and there was mystery in those pale diamond eyes, and the old, old lure. But I already knew that the man who took up with Alvina Barnes was taking up with dynamite—dynamite with a mighty short fuse. And subsequent events did nothing if not uphold my snap judgment.

I wonder if I have given you the wrong idea of Alvina Barnes. It is hard to sum her up in a few words, but in introducing her I have picked the incidents that seemed to me to reveal what must have been the dominant side of her queer personality.

She was beautiful, mysterious, cruel and dangerous. But that doesn't tell the whole story. I don't want you to think that she was coquettish; that she used the common tricks of the cheap flirt. She didn't use common tricks and she wasn't a cheap flirt. She simply appreciated the power she had over men and she didn't hesitate to use it to get what she wanted done. Maybe that is only another way of describing a flirt in action, but it seems to me there is some distinction.

There was a sign hanging up on one of the commissary roof posts that I had had lettered for the benefit of transient trade. One of the easiest and quickest ways for a backwoods grocery store keeper to fail in business is to give too much credit. Some time before Alvina came to Vingo I had stopped all but a few charge accounts and had that sign printed. It said:

**PAY ME TO-DAY AND I'LL TRUST
YOU TO-MORROW**

And while Alvina was ordering the rations she wanted she was every now and then glancing up at that sign with a mischievous smile. It was a large order, including everything in the staple groceries line to start housekeeping with—beginning with salt and ending with pots and skillets—and it made a mound that almost filled the counter.

"If you'll just put it in crocus sacks and boxes," Alvina said, "I'll send our black man around for it and he can tote it home. He went to Ormond with Jeff to pick up a team of mules and a wagon and they ought to be back by supper time."

I totted up her purchases on a slip and said that the bill came to seventeen forty-five. She gave me her most seductive smile.

"Sheriff," she said huskily, "that sign you have up there is a mighty curious sign, but it doesn't apply to white people, does it?"

"It applies to everybody," I said. "I lost nearly two hundred dollars last year

on bad accounts, and I'm running this store now on a strictly cash basis."

And this was where the distinction I mentioned was proved, I think. If she had been an ordinary flirt she would—if I know anything about human nature—have done one of two things. She would have hung her head as if she were going to cry and tried to make me feel as if I had just threatened to strike a starving widow; or she would have handed me out a line of flattery. An honest, decent minded woman would have simply pleaded for credit. And Alvina did neither. She gave me a steady, alluring look and the smile of a saint and said in that Stradivarian voice:

"Sheriff, it won't be a bit lonely for me in Vingo if you are nice to me."

And it wasn't what she said, but the way she said it. You know how a beautiful, clever woman can say something that means nothing at all, but give it a dozen dazzling meanings by the look and the smile with which she says it. That was the way Alvina did business; and the thought that came into my mind was that if her brother could afford to buy a team of mules and a wagon he must be a pretty responsible, upstanding fellow. In a place like Vingo, there is something mighty permanent and prosperous sounding in a team of mules and a wagon.

"All right," I said, "I'll charge it."

With a choice between the devil and the deep sea, I had chosen both, for when the smoke cleared and Jeff and Alvina Barnes were forever removed from Vingo, their commissary bill, on which not a dollar had ever been paid, comprised the largest single loss I had ever sustained—near one hundred and fifty dollars. But I am casting events before their shadows.

At the height of summer the sun in Vingo has a habit of setting with little forewarning; the afterglow is short lived; the world seems suddenly to plunge into the heart of darkness.

It had been dropping swiftly to the horizon all the time Alvina had been doing her shopping. For a few minutes the commissary was aglow with crimson fire, then the blaze was extinguished, leaving us there in a prompt purple dusk.

I was lighting the counter lamp when the

screen door opened. It was one of these patented lamps which burn oil, but throw out their light from a Welsbach gas mantle, and it took some time to ignite. Heavy boots tramped from the door to the counter, and I looked up to see old man Clayburn and his two prospective son-in-laws—or is it sons-in-law?—Jim and Edward Randolph.

They had evidently walked in from Clayburn's place, and they were hot and dusty and so wet with perspiration that their blue denim shirts clung to their chests and backs. And it struck me then, as it never did before, how tough men can look who have gone two or three days without shaving. Old man Clayburn was saved from this classification by having, years ago, let his facial hair grow out into a gray beard, which he lopped off now and then with pruning shears. But Jim and Ed Randolph were young men and they were supposed to be clean-faced.

Both had sandy hair, a shade or two darker than ripe wheat, and both had caroty stubble on their jaws and cheeks; and that stubble, taken together with their bloodshot, bright blue eyes, from working all day under the blazing midsummer sun, made them look like a pair of mighty dangerous customers. Up North you would have called them a couple of hard-boiled eggs; but you would have been misled by appearances, as people generally are, for the Randolph brothers were two of the mildest, gentlest, best-natured men I have ever known. They were, anyhow, up to that night; and after that night nothing in Vingo was the same.

The three men were staring at the girl in the red dress with what we had better call mixed emotions. They stared without blinking their eyes or smiling, and there was nothing intentionally rude about it. Polite society must not stare, but backwoods society is different. And that girl, smiling at each of them in turn, gave one man after another a glance that was as personal as an invitation to breakfast. Even old man Clayburn came in for his share of the attention, and I saw a fine wave of scarlet creep up under his gray beard until his watery old eyes were peering out of a sunset.

And the tough looking Randolph brothers appeared to be listening to distant orchestras and catching glimpses of heaven and smelling attar of roses. I thought they looked sort of simple myself. Alvina made a cute curtsy to each as I introduced them, and into the embarrassed silence that followed immediately her voice fell like a chord of music.

"Oh," she caroled, "you must be the Mr. Clayburn who owned the hog my dogs killed!"

Blue veins leaped into prominence on old man Clayburn's crimson forehead.

"What hog—wha-what dogs?" he stutered.

"That old sow of yours."

"That old sow?" he repeated with a mystified air.

"Yes. The sheriff gave me his two fox terriers this afternoon and the first thing they did was to attack your sow and—it died. Oh, I can't begin to tell you how badly I felt about it!"

Well, you know how much truth there was in this—just enough to make me a material witness if I wanted to tell the truth and didn't want to pay for the hog. But Alvina was a picture of frank, sweet sorrow, with her red mouth drooping and her eyes florn.

"You see," she explained in that velvety voice, "I thought it was just one of these wild old Florida razorbacks that don't belong to anybody."

Old man Clayburn had a reputation for being tight-fisted for driving hard bargains, but you wouldn't have thought so if you had seen him now. He began to chuckle as if the death of that hog tickled him beyond words.

"You needn't have worried your little head about it. That old sow wasn't fit'n for much more'n the buzzards nohow. Don't fret yourself any mo'. Hogs're a dreg on the market." And to put her at ease he said: "You visitin' in Vingo, Miss Barnes?"

"My brother Jeff and I have rented that house down beyond Big Cypress Swamp."

"Farmin'?"

She shrugged her lovely shoulders and gave him a mystifying smile, which was later explained in full measure.

"I reckon so."

"Great country fer farmin'," Ed Randolph put in in a voice that rasped with embarrassment.

She smiled at him, then glanced, as if for corroboration, at his brother.

"G-grow anything!" Jim blurted out.

Alvina looked from one to the other with dancing eyes.

"You twins?"

"Ayop," said Jim, and grinned sheepishly. "I'm an hour older than him."

"I'd hate to have to tell you apart—in the dark," Alvina said and softly laughed.

And it was just the way she said it that made the commissary feel suffocatingly hot all of a sudden. Another girl might have said it, and you'd have just chuckled, but not at the way Alvina said it. Her tone and that wicked little laugh implied something—well, significant. No; she wasn't flirting with them; she was simply working on them for something she had in mind. To Alvina, every man was grist to the mill.

That remark killed the conversation, anyhow. Silence, stiff and uncomfortable, settled again. To be sure, men like the Randolph twins and old man Clayburn are never at ease with women until they have known them a long, long time, but that didn't explain everything. They knew from Alvina's accent that she was either Georgian or Floridian, and they intuitively knew that she was a backwoods product like themselves; it was the tight-fitting red dress, her queer diamond eyes and the tantalizing thing in her manner that puzzled and embarrassed them. And you somehow know, watching them and her, that strange and dark things were having their beginnings. Don't ask me how I knew—it was in the air. *Sinister* or *insidious* or one of those words sounding so much like a hiss fitted in somewhere.

The squeaking of a dry axle was what broke the silence. It was too dark outside to see who had come up, and I supposed it was one of the teams from the quarry. But it wasn't. The door opened and two men come in, one white, one black—strangers.

"It's Jeff!" Alvina cried. "Hello, hon!"

Well, hon was an eyeful, no kidding; tall, broad and husky, with arms like mahogany logs, thick, stiff black hair, shoulders like a

wrestler's, and a face that I didn't take to at all. He had one of these grayish complexions that so often don't mean ill health, but are simply inherited; and a pair of hard, bright eyes, and a thin-lipped mouth that must have been all of four inches long. His jaw was a square, solid mass of beef and bone. Some way I had been expecting Alvina's brother to be a tough customer, but Jeff Barnes wasn't what I had been expecting. I had pictured him in my mind as sort of lean and dark and steely and quick moving like her; and I couldn't find a single item of family resemblance. But the contrast was interesting—she springy and quick like cold-drawn steel wire; he, a solid, tough mass like a drop-forging.

Alvina introduced him to old man Clayburn and the Randolph twins and me, then told the negro to load the rations into the wagon.

His name, it appeared, was Blue, on account of the color of his one good eye. It's generally what they call a high yellow negro when he has white man's eyes, but Bad Eye, his other nickname, fitted him just as well. From the looks of the eye, his blindness had come on recently, and the lid was sunken, as if he had been gouged. His good eye, when he looked at Alvina, was divided between dumb worship and fear, and I wasn't surprised to learn later that he knew what a whip felt like.

Old man Clayburn was looking Alvina's brother over.

"Yo' from G'o'gia?" he asked politely.

Jeff Barnes jerked his head in a nod.

"Goin' to raise 'taters?"

"Reckon Ah'll get settled befo' Ah raise much of anything," Jeff said, and from the tone of his voice I got the idea that he was one of these gruff, silent men who don't like being questioned. I also noted that his accent was much more pronounced than his sister's.

Old man Clayburn drew back into his shell, as all these backwoodsmen do when they are rebuffed, and looked at Alvina. She winked at him deliberately, and the old man fairly jumped. But he kept looking at her, and his watery old eyes had a glitter in them. Oh, I knew well enough what was going on.

The three of them left—Alvina, Jeff, and the yaller boy—as soon as Blue, or Bad Eye, had the purchases stowed away in the wagon. There was a general muttering of "'Evenin'!" when they went out; nothing more. Backwoods folks don't use those empty expressions which are so common in the big cities: "Do drop in and see us some time!" "Won't you have dinner with us—some time?" No, sir. In a place like Vingo society is pretty honest and straightforward. A funeral can be the social event of the year. I mean it. You'll see.

Well, it was funny to watch the expressions on the faces of those three men when the girl had gone out of the store. It might be poetic to say that the place seemed empty and desolate with her bright, lovely presence removed, and perhaps it did to them, but it didn't affect me that way. I was glad to see her go. Old man Clayburn and the Randolph twins had faced the door to say their "'Evenin's" when she had gone, and they didn't stir for a long while.

It was a still night, hot and dry and clear. You could hear the dry axle creaking until the wagon crossed the railroad tracks and started down the old King's Highway toward Big Cypress, and even then they still looked out into the dark as if they were waiting—waiting for what? I found myself all tightened up and listening, too—or was I listening? That whole experience was so unreal that I find myself even now doubting some of my impressions.

Anyhow, it came soon enough—faint and far off and as ghostly as moonlight in a graveyard. That whistle! The pipes of Pan! I shivered. Then, far away, I heard the yapping of the two fox terriers, and I wondered what the kill had been this time. Another snake? A young 'possum that didn't get out of the way fast enough? A razorback?

The barking of those little brutes seemed to break a spell. The three men turned from the door and all looked at me.

"Don't hanker much for that, brother," old man Clayburn said.

"Looks ornery," Ed Randolph supplemented.

"Mean," the other twin affirmed.

"Has that C. O. D. from Sears Roebuck come yet?" Clayburn wanted to know.

I carried the counter lamp into the partitioned-off corner of the store where post office affairs were conducted. I found his parcel. He paid and signed for it. Then they spoke of wanting cigarettes and snuff. Old man Clayburn used snuff, black mammy style—a wad tucked in between his upper lip and upper gum; the twins were cigarette smokers.

And not a word did they say of Alvina Barnes! Didn't I mention the word *insidious*? They had only laid eyes on her once, and she was already at work on them like yeast.

I asked casually, "How're the girls?"

Oh, the girls were fine. Everything was fine. When was I coming out to see the new shingle mill in operation, and when I came would I bring Belinda that book of hers I'd borrowed on the diseases of poultry?

I went as far as the porch with them, and when they were gone, I spent half an hour looking off in the direction of Big Cypress Swamp, which always is black and ugly and threatening by starlight, and listening to the granddaddy 'gator who lived in there grunting because the water was low in his wallow.

And suddenly, from the negro quarters across the tracks, a sound came that sent little needles down my spine and started my heart to pumping double-quick. It was a sound that was supposed to have been left behind in Africa when the black-birders brought those poor devils over here. Short and sharp, like a fingernail snapping against a goatskin drum: "*Tum-tum-tum—tumpa-tum-tum!*"

Yes, sir; things were mighty unsettled in that little Florida swamp village of ours.

II.

It was Belinda and Christine Clayburn who brought me in the news that things weren't exactly what they ought to have been out on that Tomoka plantation.

Belinda and Christine were the daughters of old man Clayburn and the fiancées, respectively, of Jim and Ed Randolph, and

they were fine, nice girls—the kind of girls who will some day bring the South back to where she belongs. They had been born and brought up on that isolated farm and, save for a few years of schooling in Ormond and Daytona, they had had little experience with the outside world. A high-bred Southerner—the kind who stands up and sheds a tear when a band plays "Dixie" and who is responsible for a lot of outworn and useless romantic traditions about the South—would have called Belinda and Christine "crackers," and meant that they were cheap white trash, while, as a matter of fact, the Belindas and the Christines are the backbone of the new South.

They were ambitious, intelligent girls, pretty in a wholesome, healthy way; strong and sturdy and willing. Either Belinda or Christine could cruise timber, or load a carload of logs, or keep a buzzsaw working as well as old man Clayburn himself. They were good housekeepers and good business women, and they would make the Randolph twins good wives.

Each had had her romance, and I had reasons to know that each cherished it, as every girl should. One of Jim Randolph's first acts when he came down to Vingo from Michigan was to rescue Belinda from drowning in the Tomoka. She was fishing from a small *bateau* in the deep water off Indigo Island and in trying to haul in a gill-net, lost her balance and upset the boat.

Jim was watching her from the old Yorkshire plantation, and it was mighty fortunate that he was a good swimmer. Belinda could not swim a stroke, and when the boat went over under the weight of that fine catch of mullet, she became tangled in the net. Now, the Tomoka is always full of alligators, and Belinda's position, taking everything into consideration, was pretty ticklish.

She did not see Jim throw off his coat and take a running dive into that dangerous water. She was strangling and trying to scream when something grabbed her by the hair and yanked her toward shore. Her last clear thought was that a 'gator had got her, and when she came to she was cuddled up in Jim Randolph's arms with

her forehead lying against his cheek and, as luck would have it, that day was Wednesday and he invariably shaved on Wednesdays and Sundays!

Belinda was a quick-thinking girl, and I don't think it took her long to realize where she was or how she got there. She told me, with a little twinkle in her eyes, that when she found she was in Jim's arms she sort of swooned all over again, but that has always been a good looking girl's privilege and if Jim objected to the procedure, he never did much complaining about it.

Well, the poor child was so scared by her ducking and being snatched back from the jaws of death without warning, that Jim had to tote her most of the way to the Clayburn house, almost a mile. And Belinda, in spite of being slim, was one of these hundred and twenty pounders, too!

And by night, Jim was a full fledged hero—a cross between that Hawaiian Duke who swims like a muskrat, and Jack the Giant Killer. From then on, Jim and Belinda saw more and more of each other, and one moonlight night, when they were going to go fishing, Belinda put on a fluffy white dress and anointed herself with some pretty dangerous perfume—and when they came back, without wetting a line, the fluffy white dress was all rumpled and they were calling each other "dear" and "hon." Three days later, Belinda appeared in public with a genuine chip diamond set in a real white-gold ring, and that was that. I suppose some folks would call it a pretty ordinary, every day sort of romance, but to Belinda it put her in a class with Guinevere and Juliet. And who can deny that it didn't? What is Romance but another one of these states of mind we were speaking about?

Christine's little romance ran along somewhat similar lines. A young fellow from Daytona was courting her, in a way. At least he used to drive out in a Ford that he had put a special body on and painted red. It was supposed to look like one of these geared-up gasoline devils that smash world's records on Daytona Beach, but it didn't fool anybody. Bud Larson, its

proud owner, was a mechanic in a garage over on the beach, and he made a specialty of these innocent, unworldly backwoods girls. He had to move pretty hastily out of several sections in Florida before he came to Daytona Beach, so we found out later.

Anyhow, Bud Larson used to come out and call on Christine and drive her over to dances at the Beach casino. I don't know whether Christine was crazy about the fellow or not; she claims she knew right along that he was Old Ned himself in disguise and that she was just playing along with him for the excitement of it. No woman likes to be thought a ninny, no matter how high a premium the world places on innocence, but I claim she was playing with more luck than excitement.

The garage mechanic was a smooth and a careful worker. Maybe he put his arm around her waist and kissed her a few times prior to the eventful evening that we are getting around to; in any event, on this particular night he suggested that they take a ride down to Mosquito Inlet and look at the moon. And unless some rum runner is unloading a cargo down there, Mosquito Inlet is as lonely and deserted a spot as the topmost peak in the Rocky Mountains. Nothing but sand and scrub palmetto and the Atlantic Ocean. A mile or so away is the lighthouse, but it might as well be a thousand miles off.

Well, Bud Larson thought it would be a bright idea to drive down to the inlet in his whittled-down flivver and take a look at the moon. They had supper in a Dayton Beach chop-suey joint, and our gay young Lothario had a bottle of gin on his hip. Christine had never tasted the stuff, and it took a good deal of urging on his part before she would swallow the orange blossom cocktail he mixed.

And the next thing Christine remembered was going along the beach toward the inlet with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her waist and being kissed at frequent intervals. Her first large swallow of gin had accomplished the usual results: she was so weak she was limp and the beach was whirling round and round and the moon was all over the sky. Sometimes,

there were as many moons as there are Malaga grapes in a bunch; and she was growing sleepier and sleepier and Don Juan was kissing her oftener and oftener. It didn't take Christine long to realize that she was in a mighty dangerous predicament. She could not fight off the sleep. And when she told him to turn around and head for town, he only laughed and kissed her some more.

It was like one of these dreams, Christine said, when you want to get out of the path of an onrushing locomotive and your feet are just glued to the ties. All she knew was that she must not go to sleep; but she grew drowsier and drowsier, and without knowing what she was doing, she took another drink of gin, this time raw from the flask.

They reached the inlet finally, and Larson parked on the curve where the Halifax sweeps past into the ocean. Christine's only idea was to escape. She thought she might run as far as the lighthouse and get protection from the keeper's wife until she was herself again. And with that idea in mind, she jumped out of the car—and fell flat on her face in the deep white sand! And couldn't get up!

She said she remembered seeing a bright, flaring light close to the shore, and knew it must be one of three things—a rum runner unloading liquor, some fisherman out looking for flounders, or the moon in still another position.

Fortunately for her it wasn't a rum boat or the moon, but two young fellows with a gasoline torch and spears, flounder fishing. She heard a voice, she said, that sounded familiar and miles away asking what was going on and was the lady sick or anything? Then she heard Bud Larson telling the fellow to get to hell out of here before he busted him a good one in the jaw.

And a minute later she sat up and thought she was dreaming, for in the moonlight, there was the brother of her future brother-in-law fighting Bud Larson for all he was worth and beside him yelling blue murder was Billy Smeed, the timekeeper of one of the Vingo quarries, holding up the gasoline torch!

It must have been a fight well worth see-

ing. Bud Larson, along with his other enviable accomplishments, was more or less of a professional scrapper. Anyhow, he was good enough to have been in the ring a few times, and what he did to Ed Randolph was plenty. After blacking both his eyes, breaking his nose and knocking four or five of his teeth loose, he started in systematically to chop poor old Ed's face into mincemeat.

The only fighting Ed had done had been in rough and tumble gang fights up in the Michigan lumber camps before he and Jim came south. He was as strong as an ox and as hard as nails, and if he couldn't have taken a lot of punishment, the outcome of that scrap would certainly have been different, because Billy Smeed was just waiting to drop the torch and run hell for leather if the battle started coming his way.

Christine, after the first five minutes or so of that cruel slaughter, was sober enough to realize that something just about as important, as far as she was concerned, as life or death, hung on the outcome.

Bud Larson had his feet planted wide apart in the shifty, tricky sand and was lashing out with every blow known in the prize ring. When Ed was knocked down, Bud stood over him and stretched him out as soon as he started to climb up. How many times that valiant young warrior was knocked down none of them could say afterward. But it must have been terrible. It must have been something like the way Firpo came up time after time in his second round with Dempsey—coming up from blows wicked enough to kill a man not in good physical condition—nothing keeping him coming but the miracle that we call will power, backed by his belief in the righteousness of his cause.

Time after time, he came up swinging those big clumsy arms of his and—smash!—down he would flop in the sand another time! And neither he, nor Billy Smeed, nor Christine could explain afterward just how his victory happened. All they knew was that he was crawling back to his knees one of those times and Bud Larson was reaching down behind him to pick another haymaker out of the air when Ed—still on his knees—uncorked a wild punch at the mechanic's stomach. It landed with one of

those dull, jarring "plumps," and the next they knew, Bud Larson was stretched out on his back, hugging his stomach and gasping for air. That one little wallop did it! Knocked the wind completely out of him!

Then Ed sat down and looked at Christine. And, as if it was her last fight before leaving the world for good, she wriggled through the sand an inch at a time, put her head in Ed's lap and fell sound asleep!

Ed was the first of the two warriors to catch his wind, and when he could stand up he lifted the sleeping beauty and gently tucked her into the flivver. He and Billy Smeed had come down from Daytona in Doc Lafferty's launch, and he told Billy to return the launch and to wait for him at Bill Goldenberg's garage in Daytona, where they had parked the quarry car.

Well, Christine and her brave rescuer pulled out and started down the beach for Daytona just as Bud Larson sat up. He soon saw what was going on and he called upon God Almighty and a number of lesser deities to prevent what was little short of downright cruelty; but the deities evidently weren't listening in on his wavelength, for, as he staggered to his feet, the renovated flivver gave a snort and away it went in a cloud of smoke!

It is a long ten-mile stroll from Mosquito Inlet to Daytona Beach, and it is to be supposed that Don Juan arrived there eventually. Some time later, at all events, he moved on to greener pastures and was heard of no more. He was, as my Mexican friends would say, one tough hombre.

How Ed Randolph tooled that flivver all the way into Daytona in the condition he was in speaks volumes, I have always thought, for the die hard quality that so many of these Michigan lads seem to possess. By the time he reached the pier, both eyes were so swollen he could hardly see out of them. His face was caked with blood, and blood oozed from a dozen gashes. His gums were bleeding from the loosened teeth and his nose was one terrific throb.

He pulled up under an arc light on the bridge as they were crossing the Halifax into Daytona and woke Christine up. She took one look at him and screamed. Then she began babbling—telling him all about

it and laughing and crying in a sort of hysteria. The sleep had worked off some of the effects of the gin, and what was left in her system just made her feel hilariously excited. And Ed knew that it would never do to take her home in this condition.

So he parked the car and took her for a walk up and down the river front; up Magnolia to Ridgewood and down Ridgewood toward New Smyrna. Then she sobered up enough to realize how poor Ed was suffering and insisted that he have proper medical attention. So they dropped in on Doc Lafferty and Ed had his nose set and his face washed and they each had a cup of good strong coffee. Then they went to the garage, expecting to find Billy Smeed waiting for them in the quarry flivver to drive them back to Vingo. But Billy Smeed had grown tired of waiting and had gone on back to the quarry.

How were they going to get home? Ed didn't have any money, and he knew Jim was devoid of cash, so he couldn't hire a taxi. Christine knew what would happen to *her* if she drove up at this hour of the night with a twenty-dollar taxi bill, especially after the way her dad had been warning her about Bud Larson.

They went back to where Ed had parked the flivver, but it was gone. Bud Larson had found it with the instincts of a homing pigeon.

I suppose a modern young flapper and her sweetie wouldn't have been the least bothered by this predicament; but Christine and Ed came from old-fashioned stock, and they knew just what Vingo would say—and think. It was long past midnight by this time, and Ed's nose and teeth were hurting so that he could hardly stand it, and Christine was paying for her intemperance with a splitting headache.

Finally she sat down on a curbstone and cried. This happened at the corner of Orange and Beach at two o'clock in the morning; all Daytona was sound asleep, and Christine just knew that she was disgraced forever. Starting out with one man at eight o'clock in the evening and landing back home with another the next day!

Then Ed hit upon an idea. They would go down to the depot and wait for Thirty-

Seven. Thirty-Seven came through at four o'clock and it would land them in Vingo a little after four thirty—still an hour on the safe side of daybreak. If she could only get into the house before old man Clayburn woke up!

Well, they pounded on the front door of my house at a few minutes to five, and they told me the story in shouts while I was warming up the flivver. The sun was just coming up when I let Christine out, a few hundred yards from the Clayburn house; and she slipped in and went to bed without being seen or heard.

And that was *her* great adventure—*her* long, sweet draft of romance. I suppose it was sordid—a little thing like her letting herself get drunk and then having two roughnecks fight over her. But love can do a lot of dolling up to an incident like that fight down at Mosquito Inlet. It wasn't sordid to Christine. An innocent country girl was being lured to destruction by a cold-eyed villain and a big bronzed boy with a heart of gold had suffered agonies in a fight for her honor! On moonlit sands he had fought and torn her from the clutches of a beast in human form. Yes, sir! I called it pretty good romance then, and I still agree with myself.

And a week after it happened, as soon as Ed Randolph was well enough to go to town—Christine was wearing the mate to Belinda's genuine diamond chip set in real white gold!

They were planning a double wedding, and old man Clayburn was simply tickled pink. He knew that the Randolph twins were steady, courageous, honest minded young fellows, and as sons-in-law they would make wonderful assets. He owned a good sized farm and more acres of cypress and pine than you could tally. His own sons had grown up and gone out into the world, and he was perfectly willing for the twins to help him run the place. He was building a cute little bungalow for each couple on twin knobs of land overlooking the Tomoka, and they were to be wedding presents.

Everybody was happy. The twins loved their girls, and the girls adored their twins. It was like a happy holiday until suddenly,

so to speak, a weird, low whistle was heard, resembling no sound belonging to this earth, and there—there stood Alvina Barnes!

III.

SOMETHING less than forty hours after the beautiful, red-haired, white-skinned girl with the diamond eyes had come to Vingo, Belinda and Christine dropped into the commissary to do some shopping and have me make out money orders for certain pink and silken garments of one kind and another that every self-respecting young bride generally deems necessary for the great occasion. They enriched Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward to the extent of some sixty dollars between them, chattering like a pair of birds on a fence rail in spring; but when the money orders were made out, sealed in their envelopes and put with the northbound mail, a silence fell and the Clayburn girls, after looking thoughtfully at each other, both turned and leveled their clear, direct blue eyes on me. They looked so solemn, both of them, that I stared.

"Buck," Christine said as we moved out toward the front of the store, "what's got into the twins lately?"

"And pa," Belinda added.

"Since the last couple of days," Christine went on, "they've been acting like different men."

"Maybe the bear's got 'em," I suggested, knowing full well it wasn't "the bear," which is the Florida backwoods way of referring to the summer heat.

"The bear wouldn't get all three of them at once," said Belinda. "And they haven't got the symptoms."

"They mope," Christine put in.

She was the livelier one of the sisters, as you no doubt already have guessed, and the shorter by two or three inches. Belinda was, at least by contrast, serious. Christine's eyes seemed always to be dancing, and with her little turned-up nose with its spray of freckles across the bridge, she reminded you of a spirited, mischievous child. Belinda's traits were sweetness and gravity and sympathy. I liked them both impartially.

"They sulk," Belinda added.

"They've lost their pep," Christine

sighed. "And last night when pa came in the house, he staggered. It's the first time he's touched liquor since Tommy died."

Both pairs of nice blue eyes were fixed steadily on mine, as if they expected an answer to jump right out of them.

"Jim and Ed," Belinda went on, "have been acting so strange. They've been acting strange to us and they've been acting strange to each other. What's got into them?"

"I wonder," I said.

"They act as if they're peeved about something—and they won't talk," Christine informed me.

"They went off yesterday, one at a time," Belinda added, "and they were gone all day. And the same thing happened today. Where are they?"

"In the woods?" I suggested faintly.

Belinda sniffed and Christine narrowed her eyes.

"Do men get all dressed up and shaved to go into the woods?" Christine asked.

"Maybe—maybe," I said wildly, "they've quarreled!"

At this Belinda snorted aloud. "Those boys have never exchanged an unkind word in their lives. They're devoted to each other. And what's got into pa? He's doing the same thing. Yesterday he got shaved and all dressed up and went away. What are those three up to, that's what we want to know, Buck?"

"It certainly is mysterious," I agreed.

The two pairs of blue eyes clung to mine more anxiously.

"Is it—some woman?" Belinda whispered.

"Some woman?" I said vacantly. But you can never fool a girl who is truly in love. True love gives to girls the perception of eagles and the divining powers of clairvoyants.

They exchanged knowing glances; their almost imperceptible nods implied, "I told you so!"

Christine whirled on me with blazing eyes.

"Who is she?" she cried.

A glance out of the window informed me that there was no use trying to wait the issue any longer

"Her name," I said, "is Alvina Barnes and—I think I see her coming now."

My heart was pounding slowly and with something like a convulsion on each stroke—slow and painful. Yes; Alvina was coming, and with her were the twins, cavorting about her like playful puppies. They reminded me of elephants in a circus. Have you ever seen a big elephant dance in a circus? There's something almost indecent about an animal of such size and dignity capering around—grotesque. And watching the twins made me uncomfortable for more reasons than one.

I didn't dare look at the Clayburn girls, but I knew that they were staring at the pantomime as if they were seeing something low and vulgar and disgusting.

The twins didn't see their fiancées until they were at the door. They were giggling like fools when they followed Alvina inside and watching her with a funny look in their eyes. And she was turning from one to the other with demure, droll glances, as if they were entertaining her beyond words.

And the Clayburn girls looked at her as if they would enjoy carving her heart out. No matter what she wore, Alvina would have given almost any woman plenty of grounds for worrying; and this afternoon she had on a dress that was the color of the mist that rises before sunup in the cypress swamps—a pale, delicate green. It was cut in a low V at the throat and it didn't have any sleeves and it was almost, but not quite, transparent. You could see her warm skin shining under it and it helped you to imagine the soft, enticing curves that lay underneath. And it formed a pleasing contrast to her slim white arms and her white face and her dark red hair. It was a dangerous dress. I mean it.

She carried in one hand a small brown-paper parcel.

"Good evening," said Belinda and Christine in the same breath.

"This is Miss Barnes," I got out in a voice that seemed to come all the way from China; "and this is Miss Belinda Clayburn and Miss Christine Clayburn."

The sisters nodded their dark heads stiffly and each looked at her respective twin. Alvina did nothing but grin at them.

The antics of the twins had stopped. They were looking at the floor. Their big square faces were as red as fire and shining with sweat.

"I guess we'd better be goin' along home," Ed mumbled.

"Guess we had," Jim agreed in the same muffled voice.

As if on a signal, Belinda and Christine spun around toward the door, flicking up their dresses toward Alvina in the trick these backwoods girls use in place of cuss-words, and they stalked to the porch with their chins in the air, the twins following with the same sprightly manner you see in intelligent dogs that have been caught raiding the hencoop.

They climbed into the old Clayburn buggy, Belinda and Jim in the front seat; Christine and Ed in the back. Jim picked up the reins and said, "Geddap!" in a tone of voice compared to which the most powerful cussword known would have sounded about as forceful as "Oh, gracious!" And Rabbit, the old Clayburn mule-of-all-work, laid back his ears and refused to budge.

Well, sir, if that situation hadn't been so chuck full of drama, it would have been mighty funny. Belinda and Christine scrunched down in their corners as far away from their twins as they could get; Jim and Ed sitting up as straight as cavalry officers on parade, their shiny, shaved faces redder than the reddest thing I ever saw, their mail order clothes and their shaggy blond hair making them look like a pair of solemn comedians in a musical comedy.

I heard a strangled sort of sound, and looked around to see Alvina leaning against a wall stud, both hands clapped over her mouth, her skin a blazing pink from her forehead to her finger tips. She seemed so weak from her emotion she could hardly stand up.

"Geddap!" Jim roared.

"Giddup!" roared Ed.

"Giddyap!" Belinda said impatiently.

"Gittyup!" Christine snapped.

"Git — ged — gid!" Alvina bleated.

"Shake—shake a leg, Pegasus!"

The Clayburn girls turned in their seats

and sent looks at her that should have turned Alvina into a shrinking cinder.

"Maybe she's sound asleep," Alvina suggested sweetly. "Why don't you-all address her a little louder?"

"We—" Christine began in a scathing voice, and stopped with the rest of her impulse mysteriously unused. Then she leaned forward and whispered something to Belinda, and each turned her head and looked at her twin as if he had suddenly joined some branch of the reptile family. They had each discovered that Jim and Ed had been drinking neither wisely nor well, and—well, all things considered, a deaf man could have heard the breakers a pounding on a rockbound coast.

Jim took the whip out of the socket and gave Rabbit a real sharp belt. It sounded like a rifle report, and you could see the hide under Rabbit's mangey fur turn red. A spirited horse would have started out at a wild gallop, or driven his hind hoofs up through the floor of the buggy. Rabbit just twirled one ear, let out a sigh and started plodding for home.

Alvina and I watched until that stiff and formal party had crossed the tracks, then we turned and looked at each other. Little imps were dancing in her diamond eyes and her red lips were curved into their saintliest smile. It was the same old story. When Alvina looked like that you didn't have time to think of anything else. I was going to call her down properly for mixing in with the love affairs of those two nice girls, but, well, no man I ever knew had a chance when Alvina was preparing to grind an ax.

"Gittyap!" she giggled. And we started laughing. We laughed until tears came and we were too weak to laugh any more.

I had sat down on the counter, and she pulled herself up and sat down beside me. She turned her beautiful head and looked up at me as innocently and adoringly as if she were a little girl and I were Santa Claus. And I was, in a way, but I didn't know it. With her sitting there close beside me, I was in a rosy trance.

"Sheriff," she said, in that soft, alluring musical voice, "are the twins engaged to those two kids?"

I nodded.

"They didn't tell me," she whispered.

"You know it now," I told her.

"It would be a shame," she said, "to break up anything between those two sweet girls and the twins, wouldn't it?" And she looked up at me as if she were speculating about something.

"Yes," I agreed.

"But I can't help myself if I draw men the way honey draws bees, can I?"

"You might sort of screen yourself in," I suggested.

"But I'm so lonely, sheriff," she sighed, and her lashes fluttered down to her cheeks—long lashes, so dark that they were almost black. "I'm young and I—I have these impulses. Oh, I know I oughtn't to; but— isn't it natural to have them? I'm not cold blooded."

"Aren't you?" I said huskily.

She bent her body until her shoulder was just touching mine—and some old instinct of self-preservation told me that, as sure as God made little apples, I was being lured into a trap. But its voice was mighty faint and far away, and Alvina's shoulder against mine was warm and soft, and she was looking up at me with dreams in her eyes.

"Do you think I am?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I whispered back.

She sighed again. "I want love. I want some man who will be my master and love me and love me and love me! Oh, you don't know how hard it is for a girl like me! You think I'm cold blooded and cruel and designing. But I'm not. I'm all emotion!"

And her eyes seemed to turn liquid and dark and to glow with hidden fires. And only that distant faint small voice kept my arms where they belonged. It said: "Watch your step, Buck; she's gunning for something!" So I kept my arms beside me. And next thing I knew her soft arms were around my neck and a kiss that was like perfumed silk was being pressed on my lips. And for the next few seconds the still small voice wasn't even audible.

Yes, sir, that little redhead certainly knew one or two things about the kissing business, and when I finally let her go, she drew

back and sort of wilted, as if all her strength was gone.

"What have we done?" she whispered.

"Oh, what have we done?"

I think a less experienced girl would have pushed the blame off on me; but Alvina, saying it that way, kept things in just the same key as they had been started. Her words and her tone and her whole attitude meant: "Oh, we poor, frail humans! How helpless we are in the grip of these powerful emotions!"

She shivered a little. "Sheriff," she said, "we must be careful. But you are so—so fine and noble. I—I brought you a little present and I'm so afraid it will make you mad."

"A present from you—make *me* mad?" I snorted. And for some reason a picture of old man Clayburn came into my mind. Maybe I had a clairvoyant moment myself, was sensitive for just a second to the ideas and impulses going on behind that lovely face. Old man Clayburn came into my mind as he had been the night he first saw her—blushing with embarrassment, his watery old eyes glittering with desire, his clumsy, red, gnarled old hands plucking away at his tangled gray beard. Then the picture faded out.

Alvina had put into my hand the small flat package she had brought into the commissary.

I undid the brown paper wrapping. And looked down stupidly at a pint flask without a label and full of a transparent fluid the color of domestic honey. Tiny pearls in clusters floated on top.

"Mule!" I blurted.

That faint, far-away voice leaped into full cry now; but it was drowned out by Alvina's soft whisper, accompanied by the tips of her soft fingers trailing across my cheek.

"For *you*, honey."

That old instinct had told me that something was coming, and when that flask of 'shine appeared, my mind jumped to the right conclusion. That kiss had been as carefully planned as the move that a champion chess player makes. I was the only officer of the law in Vingo, and her brother was breaking the law; and she was going to

try to make me believe that black was white.

"Taste it," she whispered. "It's something you don't see in these parts. Good corn liquor."

I drew the cork. "Corn liquor all tastes alike to me," I said. But I took a swallow; and it was just as mellow and soothing going down my throat as if it had been a procession of red-hot barbed wire.

"Isn't it prime?" she asked.

"I'll take your word for it!" I gasped.

"This is double-distilled. I'll bet you never tasted double-distilled corn liquor before in your life—unless you've lived up around Georgia and Tennessee."

I dashed the tears out of my eyes. "Your brother got a worm, Alvina?"

Her hand was resting lightly on my shoulder. I felt a gentle squeeze before she answered.

"Of course he has, hon! Everybody up Georgia way has his own still, just the same as a kitchen stove. We aren't ashamed of it. And you're a good sport and you aren't going to smash it up—are you?"

"Why not?" I wanted to know.

"Because—because you won't do anything to hurt me. And it would hurt me if you did."

"Watch your step, buddy!" that little internal voice yelled.

"The bad liquor that is being sold in all these backwoods places," Alvina earnestly and virtuously went on, "ought to be stamped out. My brother learned how to make this kind up in Tennessee. You know there's nothing healthier than good, honest corn liquor. What gives you all your trouble in a place like this is the single-run stuff, which is nothing but so much fusel oil, or the stuff they don't 'still at all but just drain off the mash. You know that. It's rank poison. While this—" She held up the flask of liquid fire to the light. "Why!" she cried. "You could feed it to babies! So, instead of being sly or sneaky about it, I told Jeff I was coming down here and have a heart-to-heart talk with you. I knew you wouldn't mind. And it is all right, isn't it, hon?"

And I heard myself saying, why, sure, as long as he didn't go too far or wasn't too

open about it, and if the high sheriff of Vingo County didn't get wind of it. Every other negro in Vingo was making his own private mule, and it was deadly stuff. A little honest corn liquor in circulation might cut down the Sunday evening knife-fights and Monday morning arrests. Besides, I have never been much of a prohibitionist.

"Blue is on his way down now," Alvina said. "Now, I want to charge a couple of sacks of corn-meal and a couple of sacks of granulated sugar—two hundred pounds of each."

Can you feature that? First she had wheedled permission from the sheriff for her brother to make corn liquor; and now she had the audacity to ask for the ingredients—on credit! Did I say that Alvina generally got what she wanted—from men?

As long as Alvina had to be wicked—and she must have been born that way—it has always seemed to me an unfair dispensation on the part of Fate that she had to waste her talents on such mediocre deviltry. What hells mightn't she have turned loose if she had been the playmate of prime ministers! She was a great artist, and all her cleverness and cunning were poured out to oil the way for that moon-shining brother of hers.

Some people might say it was a shame that she wasn't, with her beauty and brains, a good woman, and just think how much good she might have done in the world! That's what people usually say about the clever bad ones, and maybe they're right. But if Alvina's cleverness and badness had been separated, the whole idea that stood back of her would have been lost. You see, looking back now, I can still hate that girl with a fine frenzy, but I can still feel a sort of awe for the mysterious way she brewed trouble and excitement.

From the day she came to Vingo, trouble started and continued among the negroes. Some eerie, supernatural quality she possessed appealed to what we might describe as their "mystical residue"—that dark and unused chamber in the human brain that is filled with the odds and ends of racial memories which date back to the time when we thought the sun was a god and thunder his voice and the world was

filled with stalking fear. The negro has more of this mystical residue than the white man, and it is more easily stirred.

Oh, I could tell you some things! They say there isn't a remnant of voodooism in this country or Cuba, but I've heard the thumbnail on the goatskin drum and I've seen spilled blood and the remains of the goat out in the jungles and I've seen masses of blacks swaying in a mighty disturbing dance in the moonlight and the drum carrying on, brittle and tantalizing—*tum-tum-tum—tumpa-tum-tum!* And I'm just as sure that that weird quality in Alvina Barnes brought his frothing to the surface.

A week after her arrival in Vingo, the quarters were full of witch doctors—sorcerers. And the pastors of the two colored churches were two mighty worried men. You would have supposed you were somewhere in the heart of Africa instead of being a few miles away from the mile-wide strip of modern luxury that runs down one side of Florida and up the other.

All this is not easy to tell. There is so much. For this is the story of what that beautiful red-headed daughter of Satan did to a twenty or twenty-five square mile section of Florida swamps, and what in the end the swamps, striking back with all their fiendish brutality, did to her.

IV.

WHAT happened to Clem Arthur will serve to illustrate the influence that Alvina Barnes's presence had on those easy-going negroes. Nothing but her presence, mind you!

Clem Arthur was one of the best behaved blacks in the quarters. He was a young buck; married, the father of a half-dozen pickaninnies; steady, dependable, industrious and so on. He had qualities just as fine as any white man. He paid his commissary bills promptly; he owned his shanty; he never drank, fought or shot game out of season. He was, in a word, a mighty good citizen. And if you know anything about colored folks, it will mean a great deal when I say that Clem was only twenty-six.

Clem was working in a wood cutting

gang just north of Vingo when this unpleasant thing I'm telling about happened. They were getting out fat-wood against the winter demand of the Northern tourists, and Clem was teamed off with another young buck whom everybody called Lightnin'. Lightnin' was another steady-going young negro; they were both deacons in the same church, the Vingo Baptist. Nearly every male member of the congregation was a deacon, but the point I'm making is that both Clem and Lightnin' were peaceable men before Alvina Barnes came to town.

And one morning, a few days after her arrival, Clem came staggering into the commissary with seven knife wounds in his neck and chest. His shirt was soaked with blood and his usually black face was a funny tan-color.

Well, Lightnin' had done the stabbing. Why? No reason at all. No, suh; Lightnin' had jes' stepped up to him, whipped out his knife and started to chop him down.

In his excited weak state, it took Clem some time to divulge the details. It seemed that the boss-man called them out to start working on a new stand of timber, and an argument had arisen over who was to go back and fetch the axes.

They had had a pretty hot argument, and the upshot of it was that Lightnin' had started knifing him, as described.

Were there any witnesses? Yes, suh, sheriff, bofe dese men yuh had been lookin' on. The two negroes who had come in with Clem I knew pretty well. Had Clem been telling the truth?

Yes, suh, she'iff, nothin' else but!

Well, you know what liars they are.

"Where's Lightnin'?" I wanted to know.

And it appeared that Lightnin' had sought peace, solitude and tranquillity in the tall timber. I told the two nervous witnesses to hurry out to where Lightnin' was hiding and to tell him that I wanted him and that if I had to go hunting for him, he would regret it.

They returned to the commissary with the culprit in an hour, and I loaded the four of them—plaintiff, defendant and the two witnesses—into my flivver and drove

to Ormond. One of two Ormond boys who ran a grocery store was a justice of the peace. I think Harry got five dollars from the county for every case he tried. I received twelve and one half cents a mile for every prisoner and witness I transported, and one dollar for every time I turned a key on a man in the Ormond jail.

Court was held in a disused schoolhouse. Harry sat at the teacher's desk and used his fist as a gavel. Harry was a Southerner and he knew more about plain, everyday negro psychology than any man I ever met.

Inside of ten minutes, the old schoolhouse was in an uproar, and the truth was coming to the surface in large chunks. I can't understand the Southern darky when he gets excited and talks fast, but Harry pieced the truth together, and here was what he found:

When the argument between Clem and Lightnin' over the axes began to look like a fight, Clem whipped out of his pocket two small bits of carved hardwood on a red string and dangled them in Lightnin's face. Whereupon Lightnin' had stabbed him.

It all became clear. Those two little hardwood nuts were charmed—sorcered! Clem confessed that they had descended to him from his grandfather; and they were unquestionably African.

"Clem, I thought you were a deacon in your church," Harry said.

"Yes, suh, Ah sho' am!" Clem declared.

"Yet you tote these sorcered charms around in your pocket. How come, Clem?"

Clem didn't know how come. He had been toting them around for the last two, three days. And it wasn't till later that I recalled that he had been toting them approximately ever since that quivery, spooky whistle of Alvina Barnes had first been heard.

"But you knew they were sorcered," Harry insisted.

"Yes, judge, Ah knowed it."

"And you deliberately held up those charms at Lightnin' when you knew a fight was goin' to start?"

"Ah—Ah reckon Ah did, judge."

What impressed me most at that point was not the sorcered charms but the seriousness with which Harry took them.

"In other words," Harry said in a stern voice, "you used those charms to try to cast a bad spell on Lightnin'. Well, the whole damned case is reversed, sheriff. Lightnin' becomes the plaintiff and Clem becomes the defendant."

I wanted to know how he figured that out. Didn't Clem have marks of assault and battery all over his chest and neck?

"That isn't the point," Harry said briskly. "From a black man's point of view, these two charms are a lot more dangerous than a knife. Any one of these boys will swear that those charms are a more dangerous weapon than a six-shooter."

"Yes, suh, judge!" a chorus affirmed him.

"It's the first time we've had trouble of this kind," Harry explained to me, "since a sorceress came to Vingo from Apalachicola seven years ago. The fellow who was sheriff up there before you, Buck, ran her out of Vingo. You'd better see who's making this trouble. As for you, Clem, I'm finding you guilty of deliberate assault and battery, and it's goin' to cost you just ten dollars and costs or thirty days on the road. I reckon it figures out a little this side of twenty-five dollars."

I paid Clem's fine and drove my little party back to Vingo, wondering all the way who had started this sorcery business. As I say, I didn't suspect Alvina Barnes until a long time afterward. But I made a canvass of the negro quarters at Vingo and found two sorcerers and a sorceress; and I gave them till noon to be out of town. My closest friends among the negroes, warned me that I was taking my life in my hands, using such rough language on them; and that they would sorcer me proper. But they went.

It seemed to me that all I heard was "sorcer" and "sorcery." The quarters buzzed with it. And that night and for many nights thereafter there was trouble. There were fist fights and knife fights and family rows.

And one night, when I sauntered over to the quarters, not one man was to be seen. I followed a trail of many feet which led beside the old King's Highway to the river, and in a little clearing I came upon them,

stripped to the waist, the moonlight gleaming on their sweating backs and shoulders—the pack of them! And they were swaying and lifting their feet and bringing them down with thuds in rhythm, and somewhere off in the darkness under a cabbage palm, some one was clicking a thumbnail against a drum—*tum-tum-tum—tumpa-tum-tum!* Not a sound but that and the thud and their hard breathing.

Voodoo? Well, I've never met a white man who saw real voodoo, so I don't know. I'm only telling you what I saw. And I didn't see it very damned long. No, sir! There was something in the air, some memory of a memory blacker than the heart of hell. I can't describe it. I can't even remember what it seemed like. But I know I started to shiver; and something told me that this was no sight for a white man to look upon near the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century.

I went back to my house, with that drum tapping in my ears. I could hear it all next day, faint and far off—*tum-tum-tum—tumpa-tum-tum!* And I never want to hear it again.

Was it Alvina who somehow, with that satanic something in her, caused that black memory to be revived in those poor devils? I can't honestly say yes. But I won't say no. I only know that after she came all sorts of things happened; that Vingo turned from a paradise to a hell just as quickly and easily as if a page in a book had been turned. All I can tell you is the things I saw and heard.

Well, anyhow, there was this endless run of trouble in the quarters which didn't take any imagination to grasp, and there were other things. There was old man Clayburn and his shiny blue second-hand roadster and his fancy new clothes. And at the same time there were the twins, who fought and fought and fought all of one night!

Things weren't happening; they were tumbling one on top of the other!

V.

It was one of those rare Florida afternoons in August. A cupful of fleecy clouds had scampered across the sky a little be-

fore noon, and there had been just enough of a shower to cool the air and settle the dust. It was a peaceful, golden afternoon. Twenty-Nine had dropped the Northern mail and gone on. I had distributed the letters and waited on a few customers. The commissary was empty and I was sitting on the steps smoking my corncob when I heard the hum of an automobile coming up the sand road from the Dixie Highway, three miles east.

Presently, a sky-blue roadster with red trimming came around the bend; and I supposed that another tourist had got off the main road and wanted to know if this was the way to Kissimmee! They often did, and how they cursed Vingo when they heard they had to drive all the way back through that sand!

But it wasn't a tourist or a salesman; it was old man Clayburn, although I didn't guess it for the first five minutes.

The sky-blue roadster pulled up beside the commissary porch and a snappily dressed old gentleman got out wearing a wide and toothless grin. The only familiar note was the watery blue eyes and the leathery red face. The rest was all new. He had had his hair cut and his beard shaved off. He wore a stiff white collar and a pink shirt, and his necktie was yellow, red and black. His suit made my eyes swim. It was black-and-white checks—very small checks, but checks. And he had on a pair of low patent leather shoes!

I didn't associate this flashy old creature with the slovenly old gentleman I had known for going on four years. Not until he spoke did the truth dawn, and then it was only the greatest presence of mind that saved me from swallowing my pipe.

"Hello, Buck!" he snickered. "How do yo' like mah get-up?"

And he twirled around, giving me an eyeful of the rear view. Well, sir, the back of that coat was just covered with belts and straps in that vital black-and-white pattern.

"For Pete's sake," I coughed up finally, "what's the idea?"

He pulled out a silver-plated cigarette case, opened it and lit a straw-tipped cigarette. By this time I was beginning to feel

pretty sick. I knew what the answer was before he opened his mouth.

"Well, Buck," he said with a foolish old giggle, "I reckon they ain't no cause fer keepin' it a secret. I'm courtin' that Barnes girl."

"You're old enough to be her grandfather," I blurted out.

"I been all over that," he said stiffly, blowing out Turkish tobacco smoke from his nose. "We talked the whole thing out—her and me. And what's more, a man ain't any older than what he feels. I don't feel a day over forty. She wants a good home and a good steady, reliable man. She ain't int'rested in yo' young squirts."

"Did she say so?"

His grin made me feel sicker than ever. Old man Clayburn with his long, patriarchal beard had had dignity and he deserved respect. This smooth-faced, smirking foxy grandpa was simply ridiculous.

"I ain't sayin' all we done talked about, Buck."

"Do you think she loves you?"

That silly smirk again. "If she ain't, she's waverin'."

"Did she get you to buy those clothes and that car?"

"Well, what if she did and what if she didn't?" he said peevishly. "My Lawd, yo're wuss than them two girls o' mine. Just pryin' and questionin' and doubtin'. Ain't I free, white and old enough to know what I'm doin'? Is there any law agin a man fallin' in love with whatever girl he sets his mind on? Just because I been settin' back and keepin' my mouth shet fer the last ten, fifteen years, everybody seems to think I ain't fitten fer nothin' but the grave. What about how lonely I been? What about how lonely I'm goin' to be when them girls marries the twins and leaves me in that house all by mahself? Yo' think I'm nothin' but an old back number. Well, I ain't. I want some comfort and happiness in mah old age and I'm goin' to have it."

"Don't you think it's kind of risky," I put in feebly, "a man your age marryin' a girl who's hardly into her twenties?"

"I been all over that," he snapped. "Sho! Yo' make me sick and tired, Buck!

I should think yo'd be happy to see a little happiness comin' to me."

"You sure she'll make you happy?"

He tossed the mangled stub of the cigarette away. "Well, I ain't got her yit. But she's waverin'. And when she sees these here clothes and this blue roadster—" He stopped with his mouth slightly agape, and I saw a new wave of red climb up into his leathery, lined old face.

Old man Clayburn was blinking his eyes rapidly and breathing short and quick. I looked down the sidewalk where he was staring.

Alvina, in the red dress, was coming. She was still too far away to be identified as to features, but nobody in Vingo had a dress like that one. And the two fox terriers were running along in front of her.

I wanted to make a bet with the old man that when Alvina saw him and the sky-blue roadster trimmed in red, she would do but one thing. She would sink down on the ground and all but faint with laughter. But I didn't want to hurt his feelings any more than I had, and, besides, something was happening. Was Alvina ever around when something *wasn't* happening?

She was coming up the sidewalk at a run, her white arms and her white silk stockings twinkling in the sunlight. And the dogs were yelping.

Then I saw that a small rabbit was leading the procession—a small gray-and-tan swamp rabbit that was traveling just about as fast as any rabbit has ever traveled.

It was coming straight down the sidewalk in long, frantic leaps, and the dogs were only a few feet behind it. It didn't seem to realize that safety lay in the deep, grassy ditch on either side. I suppose, to a rabbit mind, that sidewalk, reaching on and on, would seem like only a part of the inferno that those yelping little beasts were providing for it. It must have been frantic with fear.

I heard Alvina's voice, shrill and maddening: "Sick 'im! Sick 'im! Atta puppies!"

The end came less than a dozen yards from the commissary porch. Peggy, the nimbler of the pair, drew abreast of the swamp rabbit. Saliva was flung from her

pink tongue as she swung her head and struck.

The rabbit, kicking and spinning over and over, sailed up into the air. And when it came down, those little devils were two feet off the ground with mouths wide open, lips skinned back from vicious little white teeth, waiting for it.

Dogs and rabbit came down in a tangle. Then came the soft, shivery, unearthly sound of the whistle. Only once—low and quivering.

Without hesitation, the fox terriers trotted to her and heeled. Well, she had taught them that trick—heeling—since I had seen her last. But can you imagine it? With their mouths full of hot, fresh blood, that whistle had called them from the kill! They heeled; they fell in sedately behind her, wagging their stub tails, ears pricked, eyes like polished jewels. Not one more glance did they give that dead rabbit.

Alvina came toward us with her saintly smile. Her face was rosy from the run and the excitement, and her marvelous red hair had tumbled over on one side. She was intoxicating.

Alvina didn't recognize old man Clayburn immediately. Then something about his gnarled, lumpy old brown hands, or his watery, worshiping old eyes told her.

Well, she didn't laugh. She let out a little cry. Then:

"Why! You nice thing!" she exclaimed, and threw her arms around his weather-beaten old neck and kissed him—on the cheek!

"You—you like it " he croaked when she let him go.

"You're simply stunning!" she cried, and she wasn't using reverse English either in referring to that thousand-candle power suit or necktie.

"I meant the auto," he gurgled.

She clasped her hands. "Did you buy it, Dick?"

"Dick?" I said to myself. Can you feature that? His first name was Richard.

"Sho!" he said. "Bought it in Daytona this mawnin'. Like it, Viney?"

"It's beautiful, Dick—just beautiful! When—oh, when are you going to take me for a ride?"

"Right now, Viney. Hop in."

She climbed in beside him and off they went, with the cut-out wide open.

About two hours later he brought her back to the commissary and drove on out to his farm.

I was back in the post office making out money order reports when Alvina came in, pink and bright-eyed from the ride.

"We drove down to Ormond and down the beach as far as the Clarendon!" she said breathlessly, then she quieted and came over beside my chair. She laid her hand on my head.

"Buck," she said in a whisper, "do you still love me?"

I looked up at her. "No," I said firmly. "Not after what you've done to that old man."

She smiled, sadly. "You don't understand, Buck. I didn't tell him to buy that funny suit and that wild car. He just went and did it—all by himself."

"You let him think you're in love with him. He thinks you're going to marry him."

"Listen, Buck, don't get sore at me. I don't like people to get sore at me."

"Well, I am sore at you."

"You won't be when you understand, hon. Honest, I didn't put these ideas into his head. I can't help it, can I, if I'm a little bit pretty and men go running after me? I haven't encouraged him. I've just been nice to him. And now—now do you know what he says? He says he'll put his big toe on a shotgun trigger if I don't marry him. What can I do? Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"I've got enough jobs," I answered, "without getting you out of the scrapes you get yourself into. You know there's trouble ahead, with old man Clayburn cutting up this way; and you've just about broken things up between the Randolph boys and their girls. What else can you expect but trouble?"

Her chin trembled. "Buck, you're just plain cruel. You know I don't mean wrong to anybody. Things just happen."

"Another thing: your brother is going too far. I said I wouldn't notice if he made a little liquor and sold a little liquor. The

boys down at the quarry tell me he's been selling it there by the gallon."

"But it's good liquor!"

"It's liquor. That timekeeper was so drunk yesterday he couldn't do a lick of work. You tell that brother of yours to go easy with the whip."

I happened to glance up when I said this, and she wasn't expecting it. I have never seen such a look in human eyes before, and I hope I will never see such a look again. No; it wasn't furious, or angry, or any of those simple emotions. It was cold and deadly and mysterious; but it melted away an instant later—so quickly that I thought I had been mistaken.

Her long lashes came down, and her lower lip trembled.

"I—I'll tell him," she said quietly. "Oh, Buck, I'm sorry about all this. I wanted you to like me. If you only knew how much it meant to me—having you like me. And you—you hurt me so!"

I have said elsewhere that there was something almost hypnotic in that velvety, lovely voice of hers. And I was looking at her. Great Heaven, how beautiful that little devil was! Yes; I was weakening. The same old story. Something made me want to smile; and I did. I smiled; and a tear came trickling down her cheek.

"Stop being cruel," she whispered. "You know you like me!"

"Yes," I said huskily.

"Darn you!" she said, and grinned; and I believe that was about all we said. I think she charged some cigarettes and went home. But I'm not sure. Those encounters with Alvina Barnes are all pretty hazy now. The mind doesn't seem to hang onto distressing things very well.

VI.

WE called the Randolph boys the Siamese twins—and they were just about as inseparable. In all their lives they had never been very far apart. They had worked side by side on one job after another up in Michigan, and down in Vingo they followed the same plan.

Medical men have told me that twins begin life as only one life cell which, by some

prank of nature, is divided into two individuals, and that that accounts for the strong bond between twins all their lives—unless something happens to turn them against each other, in which case there is no hatred that can compare to it. And judging from what happened to the Randolph twins, I can testify that that theory is a pretty sound one.

Yes, sir. The hatred that two brothers can have is terrible, but it's mild and manly compared to the way a pair of twins can hate.

The first inkling I had that things weren't quite what they ought to be was the encounter I have already related—between them, the Clayburn girls and Alvina, in the commissary that afternoon. And shortly after that incident, pretty serious rumors began percolating to me along the Vingo grapevine telegraph.

These rumors drifted in one after another, and they were about in this order:

The twins were spending every evening at the Barnes house, and they were doing a lot of drinking there.

The twins had sold their two teams of mules to one of the Vingo quarries and were spending the proceeds for Jeff Barnes's corn liquor and foolish presents for Alvina.

The twins had stopped work on the two bungalows old man Clayburn was going to give them as wedding presents.

The twins had had a row with old man Clayburn, and it had something to do with Alvina Barnes.

And after an old colored mammy had brought in this last piece of upsetting information, things began to happen pretty lively.

That afternoon Belinda and Christine Clayburn drove into Vingo and came into the commissary for some rations. I knew it wasn't the time to ask questions, but I saw some things that made me feel pretty uncomfortable. The eyes of both girls were red, as if they had been crying a great deal lately, and the Clayburn girls were not the crying kind. I also noticed that neither girl was wearing her engagement ring. That looked pretty serious.

But Belinda and Christine weren't telling their troubles to anybody. Their backwoods

training had taught them how to suffer in silence. They weren't grinning, but they were hearing it. And I am sure that, even in their darkest hours, they didn't quite lose hope. Something about the way they held their chins gave me that idea. They were proud girls, and the blow to their pride had been terrific, but they didn't whimper and they didn't ask for mercy, and when the time came for fighting they would fight, as we are going to see. In all the gloom that in some uncanny way Alvina Barnes had brought to Vingo, the Clayburn girls remained the one bright spot. They were catching glimpses of stars when the rest of us could see nothing but blackness.

They had a list made out of the rations they wanted; and Belinda read it off in her low, steady voice, and when the order was filled they paid cash as they always did, loaded the things into the old buggy and drove away, chins up and heads back.

Perhaps an hour after they had gone, the twins sauntered in. There was something stiff and odd in their manner that I detected at once. You've seen two strange dogs meet and stiffen and bristle. Well, it was something like that."

They wanted rations, too. And I didn't need *Sherlock Holmes* to tell me that at least one of those rumors I'd heard was true.

Ed picked up a picnic ham all wrapped up in stiff white paper from the counter. He picked it up by the small end, as if it were a club, and he balanced it in his hand.

"Five pound o' sugar, a coupla pound o' lard, a can o' that cheap coffee, a package of them grits, a box o' matches," Jim said.

"Aren't you boys boarding with the Clayburns any more?" I broke in, as surprised and natural as I could make myself sound.

"Nope," Jim grunted.

"Too cramped," Ed amplified.

"A can o' them peaches, a six-pound sack o' flour, one o' them cans o' salt and a cake o' sweet soap," Jim went on.

"Reckon we might as well take this ham along," Ed said in a strange voice.

"I don't want no ham," Jim snapped.

"Well—I do!" his brothed growled.

"Well, you'll pay fer it outa your own money then!"

"I will like hell!"

"Hey!" I yelled.

But I might as well have been hollering at twin rocks. They had swung about from the counter to face each other, and they were half crouching, with their heads ducked down and their teeth bared.

What had happened to all that nice, quiet, easy-going affection? Gone. All gone! In its place was nothing but fiery-eyed hatred. Jim had curled up his big brown hands into fists and Ed was wagging the ham in his hand.

It wasn't a very reassuring situation.

"Come on," I said briskly. "Calm down. I'll make you a present of the damned ham."

"No," Ed snarled, "it's goin' to be paid for outa our money."

"Over my dead body!" Jim croaked.

It seemed to me I could see the hair start to bristle up on the backs of their necks.

What happened happened pretty quick.

"Ya sneak!" Ed roared.

"Ya dirty skunk!" Jim shouted.

Everything considered, I'll say they were fighting words.

Up came the ham in Ed's hand with a smack on Jim's face. Jim grabbed the ham and threw it on the floor. Then they began slugging. Well, I enjoy a fight as well as the next man, but that spectacle was sickening to watch. All that brother love turned into killing hate.

And they fought the way you would naturally expect a pair of twins to fight. Not one of them gave an inch of ground. They stood just where they had been standing, as if their feet were nailed to the floor, and—slugged. And when a blow landed, the whole commissary shook. They were six-footers, trained down by hard work to nothing but beef and bone, and how they could slug!

And there wasn't an ounce of science in a ton of it. It was simply a case of two equally matched young giants smashing each other blindly. No scheme, no plan, but just to batter the other down.

Ed Randolph was the first to yield, and he yielded all the way across the long room. Up to that point they were simply demonstrating what happened when an irresistible

force met an immovable body. But Jim landed what looked like a clean upper-cut to the jaw. Ed went stumbling back. He knocked over a stand of brooms with one wild swing of his left arm as he tried to balance himself, but that didn't stop him. He kept going until he struck the sheet iron stove. I had nailed the legs to the floor the winter before, but they were detachable, and his impact forced them out, and the stove shot off its tin plate into the back of the store, spilling soot and ashes as it went; then the sheet iron stove-pipe began coming down in sections all around him.

He was sitting down and looking bewildered and Jim stood over him ready to strike at the first move.

"That's enough!" I yelled. "Do the rest of your fighting outside."

"Come on outside, you sneak," Ed muttered and climbed up.

They went outside to a cleared spot in the broom sage field, and they started in again. They fought until they were so tired they could only hang onto each other and claw and gouge. Then they went over to the depot, sat down and started wrangling, and in a few minutes they were fighting again. It was almost dark when they declared another armistice and started off—without their rations.

Next morning I got all the reports on that fight from the blacks who had followed them home. I have never heard of another fight quite like it. Stopping every now and then, it took them until after midnight to reach the tumbledown old shanty they had moved into, and once there they quarreled and fought at intervals until almost daylight. They had to stop finally from sheer exhaustion; and old Uncle Dan Vickus, who had followed the fight from the railroad depot to daybreak, told me that their faces were so battered you could not tell them apart.

It was a depressing thing to hear about. I asked Uncle Dan if at any time he heard them mention anybody's name in particular, and he grinned his red-gummed old grin and said:

"No, suh, nubuddy's but de name ob ouah heabenly Fatheh!"

Alvina Barnes said that she sensed something terrible was happening. She and the fox terriers were sitting in a row on the commissary steps when I went down to the commissary early that morning and opened up. Uncle Dan was there, too, giving her the full details of that all-night fight.

The sun was up, but it was hidden behind a bank of pale green mist. It was a queer morning, and I have good cause to remember it well. The swamps were steaming and this steam hung in little greasy, pale-colored clouds over the black clusters of cypress. Here and there were long, open lanes of transparency through the mist. Everything seemed blurred and unnatural. It reminded me of the way things look sometimes when you wake up suddenly and things won't come into focus. You felt that by blinking hard you could drive the mist away. It was chilly and quiet. Miles away the ocean was drumming on the beach, and the ground seemed to be trembling.

Alvina had a blue scarf about her shoulders, and she was all hunched together, as if she was cold. She looked up at me dreamily, without smiling. And there was a question in her eyes.

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" said I.

"I knew something was happening," she went on. "Something terrible. I don't know what tells me these things, but I knew. I couldn't sleep all night, and that granddaddy 'gator who's got himself parked in that deep swamp in front of our house was moving around and grunting all night. This drought has dried up his wallow, and he grunts all the time. He came out into the moonlight last night, and he sort of looked things over. I never saw him before, and in the moonlight, with the mist and all, it was like a night on earth a million years ago. He came up out of the swamp leaving a trail of mud behind him. He walked all around the house without stopping until he came to his trail again, then he put his head back and looked up at the moon, and his eyes looked as if they had little green electric lights behind them. I thought I was dreaming. But I knew something was wrong."

The lovely, velvety voice stopped; and

I glanced at Uncle Dan Vickus. His mouth was all pinched up and his black old nose was wrinkling and his oystery old eyes looked as if they were seeing ghosts.

"If there's anything in what folks say about their age being regulated by their size," Alvina went on, "that 'gator must be all of eight hundred years old. Think of being on earth ever since the year twelve hundred! He must be eighteen feet long. Well, finally, he opened his horrible mouth, let out a long hiss at the moon and backed away from it as if he was scared—backed all the way into his swamp. If he comes out again, Jeff is going to shoot him. That big slimy, scaly brute is dangerous."

"Dawgs," Uncle Dan croaked.

Alvina looked at him. "These pups?"

"Yassum. It's gettin' near his feedin' time and he's bankerin' fo' dose dawgs. Ah reckon he's done away wif twenty dawgs jes' sence Ah been yuh, miss. He's hongry fo' dem dawgs, and ef yo' don' watch out he'll git 'em."

Alvina smiled dreamily and patted the two blood-mad little brutes. Then she looked up at me.

"Buck," she said, "what started that fight?"

I told her I didn't know.

"But I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut," I added, "that you're at the bottom of it." She shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

"If lightning came down and burned up your house, you'd blame me," she said. "You seem to think I'm responsible for everything that goes wrong." She sighed. "I sure am sorry I missed seeing that fight. It was a tie, huh?"

"Yassum," Uncle Dan answered.

"Did you tell your brother," I asked, "to give that still of his a chance to cool off once in a while?"

"I gave him your message," Alvina said, playing with Timmy's ears and not looking up. "I reckon we won't be stayin' here much longer. Our welcome seems to be worn pretty thin."

Uncle Dan shuffled off toward the quarters, and when he was out of earshot, Alvina looked up.

"Sit down here beside me," she said, and when I had sat down she snuggled her hand

under my elbow. "Buck," she said, "what's got into you lately? Don't you really like me?"

"Sure," I said.

"A whole lot?"

"Too much."

She gave my arm a squeeze.

"Well, I like you too. I think I'm fonder of you than any man—"

And that was as far as she got. I have often wondered since what would have happened if that fellow from the luxury belt hadn't dropped in just then and interrupted her. I think we had been working toward that moment from our very first meeting, and I find myself wondering now if she meant anything she said; but I am sure that we were closer then than we ever were before or afterward. That moment was the beginning and the end of everything. I realize that now. At the time I was just sore at that fellow for interrupting us.

Damn that fellow!

VII.

HE drove up in one of these long, gray, low-slung foreign cars. It seemed to glide up out of the mist like a gray panther with only a faint hiss. It had a pointed hood and tires like doughnuts. They were the first balloon tires in Vingo.

"Good morning!" he said, and his smile was like a baby's, except that it showed two lines of the whitest teeth I ever saw.

We backwoodsmen always resent his type. I sized him up in a glance. I knew he had come from one of the swell hotels, and had never known a second's real worry in his life. He had that curious air about him that only those men have who have had plenty of money all their lives. Easy and confident. He was a dark, handsome young fellow with fine, clear dark eyes, and I remember him always smiling. Under his right arm he carried a double-barreled shotgun that must have cost at least five hundred dollars. The butt was carved and the steel-work was a mass of intricate engraving and inlaid with gold and silver.

He had on whipcord hiking pants that looked as if they'd been made by a London tailor, a pair of expensive elkskin snake

boots, a light-blue silk shirt, a dark-blue necktie and a soft brown leather hunting jacket. He didn't wear a cap, and his hair was black and thick and wavy.

I'm a poor judge of a man's looks, but I knew somehow that any woman would think he was mighty good looking. He was tall and lean and broad-shouldered, and his skin was a rich tan from outdoor living. I guess the word that sums him up best is *aristocratic*. Everything about him was in that key—his face, his clothes, the way he carried himself.

It was his quick, clean smile that I remember best. It came so easily; and you knew that he was finding the world a pretty agreeable place to live in. At that moment, when he climbed down from that gray panther of a car, he must have taken me for a regular backwoods grouch, I was just sore at the interruption.

"Gee whiz!" Alvina whispered. "Gee whiz!"

He came straight to me with his hand outstretched.

"Good morning!" he said in a deep, cultured voice. "I didn't suppose anybody in the world was up so early but myself." He grasped my hand. "My name is Anatole Logan. You're the sheriff and game warden, aren't you?"

"And the postmaster and the grocery storekeeper and the notary public," Alvina put in in her low, velvety voice.

I introduced them. Well, he hardly glanced at her. Just bowed formally and smiled, then turned back to me. It must have been a big surprise to Alvina, having any man treat her that way. Anatole Logan, so I found out later, was the first man of that type she had ever known. Most men turned beet-red and became speechless when they met Alvina, but Anatole Logan apparently wasn't even interested.

"The garage man in Ormond told me I could find plenty of quail out here," Mr. Logan explained himself, "and he told me to look you up, as you were pretty strict with Northerners about hunting permits. Well, here's my permit." And he handed me the slip. "Now, how about quail?"

"There's plenty of quail all through

here," I told him, "but of course you ought to know just about where the coveys've been seen. I don't do much hunting myself, and I haven't seen many quail so far this fall."

"There're loads of them!" Alvina broke in eagerly. "I saw forty of them yesterday behind the old Dimlock place."

"I didn't bring my dogs South," the young man said, "and I don't suppose there's such an animal here as a guide."

"I'll show you where they are!" Alvina cried. And for the first time he really looked at her, and his smile slowly went away.

"I love to hunt! And I'm teaching these pups to fetch. They'll fetch rabbits and squirrels already. I'd like to try them on quail."

There was a note in her voice that I had never heard in it before, a sort of pleading note. And she looked embarrassed.

The young fellow hesitated. "Well," he said finally, "it's mighty kind of you, but—"

"I'd love to!"

"Well—"

"You can leave your car parked right here. Buck'll look after it, won't you, Buck?"

"Sure," I said. "Sure."

"We'll try that broom sage field first," Alvina said eagerly. "And we'll cut right around to behind the Dimlock place."

They started across the road to the broom sage field, the two fox terriers trotting along at heel. Presently, I could see nothing but their heads above the broom sage. Then, suddenly the shotgun went off, both barrels, one after the other. The dogs started to bark and Alvina gave a little shriek.

Then, in the silence, came the low, unearthly, quivery note of Alvina's whistle. It brought every nerve in my body awake, alert and tense. That whistle of death! And I wondered what impression it was making on Anatole Logan.

It was almost noon when they returned. The young fellow did not come into the store. I heard the grating of the self-starter, then the low whine of the gears as he drove away; and Alvina came in.

I was behind the counter wrapping up sugar in five-pound packages against the Saturday night rush; but I stopped when Alvina came over. She looked pale and in some way different.

"What kind of luck did he have?" I asked her.

"Buck," she said in a low, strange voice, "that's the man."

I straightened up at that. "What man?"

"The one I've been wanting to meet all my life. Oh, isn't he wonderful?"

Even then I thought she was making fun of him. Alvina had more natural born wisdom than any woman I ever knew, and she must have realized at the very beginning that men of his class and girls of hers were not meant for each other. She never took men seriously, and even after looking at her again and noticing how tired and unhappy she looked, I still thought she was joking.

"Seems to me you've got enough scalps at your belt already," I said, reaching into the barrel for the sugar scoop.

"He's wonderful," she repeated in a dreamy, husky little voice. "Hasn't he the most beautiful eyes?"

"Alvina!" I said.

"We're going hunting again, day after to-morrow," she said in the same dreamy voice.

"Why!" I exclaimed. "You're crazy about this fellow!"

"I'm not ashamed of it," said Alvina.

I dropped the scoop back into the barrel. It was the beginning of the end, and I knew it.

"What's going to happen to all these men you've been stringing along?" I demanded. "How about me? How about old man Clayburn? How about the twins? How about that chinless young fool at the quarry? How about that married man, Jacobson, up at Cypress Spoon?"

"Oh, shucks," said Alvina.

"As far as I can make out, you've let every one of us believe—and I'll be damned if I know how you do it—that you're crazy about the man you're talking to, and that the rest don't count."

"Nobody counts but Anatole," said Alvina. "I'm getting tired of this place

anyhow. It's deadly. If Anatole hadn't come here to-day, I'd have gone back to Georgia inside of a week."

I think I began to hate Alvina at exactly that point.

VIII.

It's queer about those Southern swamp towns. You go out for a walk, or you kill a snake, or do anything—it doesn't matter what you do—and while you're about it you can make sure that not a living soul has seen you. Then you find out that a dozen pairs of eyes have been upon you all the time. No; they weren't spying. They just happened to see you and you didn't happen to see them. No matter what time of day or night it is, somebody sees everything that you do.

Anatole Logan and Alvina Barnes went through the broom sage field that morning, then through a pine hammock and into another broom sage field behind the Dimlock farm. They didn't pass near a single habitation. They didn't pass near any of the wood-cutting or tie-cutting gangs. Probably they didn't see a living soul from the time they left the commissary until they returned.

But before dark that night I heard from six pairs of grinning lips, that while she was crawling through an old barbed wire fence back of Dimlock's place, Alvina had caught the hem of her dress and that the Northerner, in stooping to free it, had kissed her. And that she had returned that kiss with another that lasted a mighty long time.

Ed Randolph, with his nose and mouth all swollen and one eye puffed shut, was in the commissary when the rumor-bearers began coming in. When he heard about that kiss he looked a whole lot sicker than he had looked before. Uncle Dan Vickus was in the store at the same time, and Uncle Dan came nearer to being a radio broadcasting station than any medium of communication in the quarters—and there were plenty. And I knew that the story of that kiss would be in both rock quarries, the turpentine camp at Cypress Spoon and the farthest, most remote tie-camp in the section before dark.

Uncle Dan and Ed Randolph sauntered out of the store within twenty seconds of each other. Uncle Dan started off down the road toward the Clayburn farm, and Ed Randolph started across the field toward the Barnes's place.

What happened when each reached his destination I learned from various sources. Bad Eye Eely, the Barnes black man of all work, was chopping wood for the kitchen stove and Alvina was inside getting supper when Ed Randolph got there. Ed went straight into the kitchen without knocking, and asked Alvina a straight question.

Was it true that this Northern fellow had kissed her?

Alvina looked him square in the eye and told him it was not only true, but that she loved Anatole and didn't care who knew it.

"How about me?" Ed said.

"Well, how about you?" Alvina snapped, without a spark of sympathy.

"Well, you said you loved me," Ed stammered.

"I never said anything of the kind. You're dreaming. Don't be silly."

"If you haven't said it," Ed came back at her, "you've let on in a dozen different ways that you love me. It ain't right to kid a man along this way. You've let on to both Jim and me that you love each of us, and I thought you was just stringin' him along. I thought you loved me all the time."

"Oh, stop whining," she snapped.

"I ain't whining, Viney; I'm only tellin' you you ain't been playin' fair."

He looked sort of dazed and his skin had turned yellow, Bad Eye said—just as if he might be going to faint away the next minute.

Then he started in again.

"Viney," he said in a voice that sounded as if it was full of tears, "I've laid all my plans thinkin' you and I was goin' to be married. And if you turn me down this way I don't know what I'm goin' to do. I don't want to live if I can't have you, Viney. You can't mean it. You just can't mean it, Viney. What 'll I do?"

"What do I care?" Viney snapped.

"But I love you. You've let me kiss you!"

Viney's temper had been rising all the time, and this last was a little more than she could swallow.

"Get out of here, you big, clumsy fool!" she cried. "It makes me sick to look at you. Go on away. I hate the sight of you. I've always hated the sight of you!"

"But where 'll I go " he groaned.

"Go on back to that little sap you were engaged to. I don't care where you go, but beat it!"

"You know I can't go back to her. You know she wouldn't have me after what's happened."

"Well, I don't care. I'm busy."

Ed had got over the first shock of finding just how true Alvina had been to him—or to anybody. But he wasn't the resentful kind. Some men, I suppose, would have taken Alvina out of the kitchen and into the yard and beaten her up properly. Well, she deserved it. But Alvina was lucky. There wasn't one man of that kind in her whole crop of victims. With that ponderous, slow-working mind of his, Ed came along in a minute with another argument.

"You know, Viney, that no good is goin' to come out of your lovin' this rich feller. Men like him don't take up with girls like you, just except to play with. You know that."

That was just a little more than Alvina could stand.

"If you don't get out of here this minute," she raged at him, "I'll call my brother and have him run you off with a gun. Now ball the jack."

Ed balled the jack. He wasn't afraid of Jeff Barnes and his gun, but it made him so sick seeing and listening to this new Alvina that he simply couldn't stand any more.

Later that evening Jim Randolph dropped in. He had heard the story of that kiss, and he wanted to know what was what. And Alvina told him just what she had told his brother. Then that chinless young fool from the quarry drifted in, and he learned what she thought of him.

It began to appear as if Alvina was through playing her little game. Well, she was. But she had started a ball rolling that she hadn't quite calculated the size of. She

had thrown a boomerang into the air and—well, you know the queer habits of boomerangs.

IX.

WHEN Uncle Dan Vickus reached the end of the three-mile road that ran from the commissary to Clayburn's, he found the old man out in front with pails, rags and a bottle of furniture polish putting the finishing touches on the sky-blue roadster. Old man Clayburn was studying on taking Alvina out for a moonlight ride down Daytona Beach that evening with supper afterward at the chop suey restaurant.

When Uncle Dan started telling him the story of the kiss, old man Clayburn sat down heavily on the running board and began wiping his beardless chin with a rag soaked in furniture polish. And when Dan had finished, the old man called him a foul-mouthed scandal monger, a liar, an asterisk old gossip toter and some stronger things. Old negroes love more than anything else to be the bearers of bad tidings, and they know they are going to be abused at first and they don't mind.

Uncle Dan was giving him some details and old man Clayburn was cursing him some more when Ed Randolph, fresh from his little chat with Alvina, ambled up. He and old man Clayburn hadn't been speaking for several days. He listened for a while before he said anything.

"Listen, pa," he said finally—and it was the first time he had called the old man pa since the trouble over Alvina started. "Listen pa; what Dan says ain't nothin' but the truth. I've just had a talk with her, and she admits it's true. And what's more, she admits she's been stringin' all of us along and playin' one, ag'in' the other; and on top of all that she says she's crazy mad in love with this Northern feller. So I reckon we'd better start patchin' things up. What do you think?"

"Me?" old man Clayburn whispered. "Why, Ed, I think—" He seemed to be having some trouble getting his breath. "I think—" But he couldn't go on. He started in wiping his chin and his cheeks with the furniture polish rag. Then he threw it down, stood up and looked at the shiny

blue car he had bought for courting purposes, and he shut his eyes as if the sight of it made him feel sick.

Then he rubbed his hand, as if he was dazed, across his forehead and staggered.

His face had turned red, and now it looked purple, and the veins in his forehead stood out sharp and clear as if they were going to burst. And as suddenly as that had happened, he turned pale—as white as death. He clawed the air a few times, then crumpled up and fell.

Uncle Dan, who had seen this thing happen before, yelled:

"It's a stroke, Mista Ed. Run fo' a doctor!"

Ed jumped into the fancy roadster and came into Vingo along that twisty, sandy road at thirty-five an hour. He stopped at the commissary long enough to tell me what had happened, then drove on into Daytona for Doc Lafferty.

Old man Clayburn was still unconscious when Ed returned with the doctor. The girls had put him to bed and were doing everything they could for him.

Doc Lafferty worked over him for two solid hours before a quiver of life showed. Then the old man opened his eyes for a moment and said something that sounded like "No fool like an old fool."

Shortly after that his heart started to flutter. His system was full of Jeff Barnes's corn liquor, and he didn't have much reserve to fall back on. Some time around midnight his heart stopped beating entirely.

X.

"SHE couldn't have killed him any more deliberately if she had stuck a knife into his heart," Christine said. "The poor old man! I'd like to kill her! I'd love to sink my nails into that white neck!"

I felt uneasy then ever. Christine and Belinda were quiet, sensible girls. It was enough to frighten you to hear Christine going on this way, so deadly, so dangerous. Well, you know how the quiet, sensible kind are when they're stirred up. If you goad them so far they're apt to do almost anything, and I didn't want Christine to do anything rash.

"Pilin' insult on top of injury," she got out between clenched teeth. "Look at her!" she said. "And listen to her! I can't stand much more, Buck. I'll have to do something pretty soon, or I'll have to scream. And the way those two fools are acting!"

Christine was dressed all in black and in her suffering she looked almost beautiful. She was a madonna everywhere but her eyes, and in her eyes was murder.

The whole house was full of the smell of fresh shellac. Uncle Dan Vickus, who was an old hand at this sort of thing, had made the coffin himself out of some seasoned cypress, and it was out there in the sitting room, either end resting on a chair.

Outside, in the darkness, the negroes were chanting. It was queer. There was a note of jumpy excitement in their voices. A little black girl, ten or twelve years old, was carrying the chant in a thin, shrill, hysterical voice, calling on God Almighty for blessings and forgiveness of our sins and for peace everlasting, and every now and again when she choked for breath, the choir of tie cutters, quarry laborers and section workmen and their women would moan "A-a-a-men!"

People were slipping in and out of the house, and inside everybody seemed to be moving around, restless. It wasn't like any wake I've ever attended. In a place like Vingo a wake is always a social event. People come from miles around and sit and talk about things in natural voices. There isn't a revelry, but the corpse doesn't exactly spoil the party either. Once in a while some old mammy begins bawling at the top of her lungs, and everybody listens politely till it's over, then they go on talking as before. New people come in and sympathize with the mourners, then they join the crowd and the talk goes on. There is always more than enough to eat. Every one is supposed to bring something—a sweet potato pone, or some corn bread, or a boiled leg of ham or some bacon to be fried for sandwiches.

It was almost eleven o'clock, and all the food was still stacked up in the kitchen, and no one was touching it. The usual pleasant melancholy was lacking. Every one was uneasy and jumpy. There was a feel-

ing in the air that something awful was going to happen. Well, it did.

"After all she did to paw," Christine was saying to me in that dull, dangerous voice, "you would think she would have a little pity on us. But look at that get-up! And the nerve of her bringing that fellow! I could kill her! And wouldn't you think those two fools would have a little shame?"

Well, there wasn't much I could say. I drifted into the sitting room and took a look around. Alvina was sitting there as I had seen her last, rocking slowly back and forth in a chair that creaked. The fox terriers were curled up on the bare floor at her feet, looking up at her with their sharp little eyes and every now and then thumping the floor with their stub tails.

I don't think any one would have minded the rest of the things Alvina had done if she only hadn't smoked cigarettes. She was smoking one cigarette after another. Alvina was the first cigarette smoking woman in Vingo, and there is a big distinction between a corncob pipe and a cigarette. Once in a while, absent-mindedly—I hope—she blew a trail of smoke across the lid of the coffin. The air was heavy and quiet, and the smoke would roll along the lid and pour off along the edges as if it was water. I suppose it fascinated her. But I don't know. She was queer and cruel. She might have been doing it on purpose. I think she got a lot of joy out of just hurting people. Well, she had certainly gone out of her way to hurt the Clayburn girls.

As if wearing that bright red dress and smoking cigarettes weren't enough, she had brought Anatole along. He had come out to hunt quail and she had persuaded him to stay over for the wake. And if Christine and Belinda had understood her reason for bringing him as I believed I did, they would have been more furious still. They thought she had brought him simply to flaunt him in their faces, but I don't think that was it. Of course, she wanted him near her; but I think she was doing what a girl who is madly in love with a man will always do. She was trying to please him. She had traveled enough to know that wakes of this kind weren't common and she had

found out that he had never seen one before. She thought it would amuse him—to see how we roughneck backwoodsmen acted at a wake, and he thought it was a lark.

Oh, he didn't grin or act out of the way, but every now and then he would catch Alvina's eyes and a little twinkle of understanding would come into his. I could imagine him telling his fashionable friends about it afterward. It was an "experience" for him, and the way he would tell about it you knew his friends would go into roars of laughter. The old mammies letting out wails every now and then; the blacks outside chanting with as much fervor as if Old Ned himself were at their heels; all the food piled up in the kitchen. From his point of view it was probably mighty amusing, but not from mine. It was an insult to those nice girls, and Alvina had brought them enough suffering without this.

I sat down in a corner and watched the two of them and wondered where things were going to go from here. It didn't seem to me that there was any justice. She had come into Vingo and turned our little backwoods paradise into something closely resembling hell. She had been responsible for the death of one man and she had ruined the lives of several others.

The fox terriers were growing restless. Suddenly the two of them, for no apparent reason, jumped to their feet with back hair bristling and fangs bared, their sharp little noses pointing at an open window. There was nothing there. It was black outside.

Then Alvina whistled, very low. It was the eighth or tenth time this had happened—the dogs suddenly jumping up and bristling. I suppose the scent of some passing animal—maybe a raccoon or a 'possum or a wildcat—had drifted into the window and reached them. Those woods are full of wild things. And each time they bristled, Alvina would give that low, haunting, unearthly whistle. It made me jump every time I heard it, and it sent chills trickling down my back. The pipes of Pan! Somehow, that whistle belonged to death; it belonged in this very room.

And each time it happened, something would happen outdoors. The little black girl would start singing in that wild, thin

key as if she were frightened out of her wits. I think she was. I think she was singing on the same principle that people whistle when they go past a graveyard.

That whistle of Alvina's seemed to terrify the negroes. And it was not until then that I realized just how much Alvina was to blame for the trouble that had been going on in the quarters. I thought of the fight that Clem Arthur had had with Lightnin', and of that dreadful dance that night down by the river with the drum under the cabbage palm going *tum-tum-tum—tumpa-tum-tum!* It was the terrifying thing in that whistle that had started to life in their sleepy minds those old racial memories. And now, outside in the dark, they were fighting it off again with the only weapon they had—the weapon the white man had given them—a faith in a white God who could work miracles.

And in her tight, red dress, with her red hair curling back from her white, moody face, Alvina reminded me suddenly of terrible things. In the poor light, her white, tapering arms became snakes. And I realized that, with all her beauty and the loveliness of her voice, she was nothing but a reptile. In that moment I hated her.

Across the room, in a corner, the Randolph twins were sitting stiffly on a bench looking at her—never taking their eyes off her. And I knew Christine was wrong. They weren't fools. They weren't infatuated with her any longer. The same thing that was in my mind was in theirs. They were seeing her now as she really was, a soulless thing, fit for nothing but badness. And they were studying her with the deep amazement with which a simple mind will always contemplate a grotesque thing.

In another corner Jeff Barnes sat, slumped down in a chair with his eyes closed, his pasty face looking stupid. He had had the bad taste to bring, as his contribution to the wake, a gallon jug of yellow liquor. And I didn't doubt for a minute but that Alvina had put him up to it.

I felt myself getting hot under the collar. I couldn't sit there any longer. I wanted to do something violent. I strolled back into the kitchen and found Belinda and Christine with their heads together.

When Christine saw me, she said in a low, tense voice: "Buck, come outside; we want to talk to you."

I followed them outside and we sat down on the top step of the kitchen porch. The sky was overcast. There were no stars anywhere, and there was a threat of rain in the air. The rainfrogs were tuning up, and now and then a firefly flickered green.

"We can't stand it any longer, Buck," Belinda said. "That woman is directly responsible for paw's death, and now she comes here with that man and those dogs."

"And in that dress and smokin' cigarettes," Christine added angrily.

"She knows what she's done. She knows she ruined paw. We haven't got enough here to live on now."

"I don't know what you mean," I said, suddenly cold.

"Where do you suppose he's been gettin' the money from to go gallivantin' around with her and buy her presents and buy that bad liquor her brother makes?" Belinda wanted to know. "He spent everything we had in the bank and last week he sold off all his timber across the Tomoka to the Deland Syndicate. What have we left? Just a few acres of second-growth pine and those two swamps. And you know you can't get a black to go in them on account of the 'gators and moccasins."

"Did you know he had bought her a ring that cost almost a thousand dollars?" Christine took her up. "She milked him dry. And what are we going to do? Where are we going to go? So far as we know we haven't any relations. Who are we going to turn to? We can't live out in these woods all alone now."

She grabbed my arm. "Buck," she cried, "what are we going to do?"

"Gosh," I said. Well, what was the answer? Yes, Alvina had done a mighty thorough job.

Christine let go my arm and jumped up. I couldn't see her, but I knew from the sounds that she was wringing her hands.

"I've got to do something!" she burst out finally.

"Not to-night!" Belinda said.

"Yes, to-night! I'm goin' to kill her. I'm goin' to get paw's gun and kill her!"

"Sit down," I said sternly.

"I won't! She's ruined our lives! She took our boys away from us and made fools out of them. And she's taken money that belonged to us. I'm goin' in there and kill her—the snake!"

"Wait a minute," I said.

"No," she said, "I've got to do *something*. I can't stand it. I feel like smashing things. I'd like to take a club—"

"We might smash that still," Belinda suggested.

There was a moment of very tense silence.

"We will!" Christine cried in a shrill voice. "We'll smash that still!"

"Not now," I gasped.

"Yes—now!" Christine exclaimed. "You can swear us in as your deputies and we'll do it officially. It ought to've been smashed weeks ago! Why didn't you, Buck? Why didn't you?"

I didn't try to explain why I hadn't gone after that still. The excuses Alvina had furnished me with didn't seem very wholesome now—not after the product of that still had helped kill a man. But how well I remembered her argument!

"The bad liquor that is being sold in these backwoods places ought to be stamped out," she had said. "My brother learned how to make this kind up in Tennessee. You know there's nothing healthier than good, honest corn liquor. What gives you all your trouble in a place like this is the single-run stuff, which is nothing but so much fusel oil, or the stuff they don't still at all but just drain off the mash. You know that. *It's rank poison!* While this—Why! You could feed it to babies!"

"All right, girls," I said grimly, "we'll go down there and bust up that still, and you can go along as my deputies, if it will make you feel any better."

"We'll start now," said Belinda.

"We'd better take paw's Colt along in case that one-eyed black is guarding it. I haven't seen him around here to-night."

She rose to go in. For a moment there was silence. The rainfrogs had stopped shrilling. And in the silence I heard a chair thump down softly on the floor. The sound came from an open window near us, and I realized then that all of our conversa-

tion could have easily been overheard by Jeff Barnes; and I knew that the sound had been made by the two front legs of his chair coming down.

I sauntered into the sitting room to see if he had taken alarm, and was just in time to see his large, pasty hand disappearing from the window sill. Yes, sir. He had heard every word of it, and was making tracks for that whisky factory of his—that still that made corn liquor pure enough for babies to drink!

That meant trouble. I looked over the dozen people sitting around the room and whispered to the Randolph twins.

"We're going down to raid Barnes's still. Barnes got wind of it and has gone. Come on."

Alvina got up and came over then, with a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth.

"What's the excitement?" she wanted to know. "Why did Jeff just dive out of that window?"

I paid no attention to her. The twins sprang up and followed me out of the room. I heard Alvina say to her handsome North-erner:

"Come on, hon. Something's up. Let's see what's going on."

She snapped her fingers for the fox terriers, and they followed us out.

I went to the post where Jeff Barnes had tied his mule, but it was gone. And I knew that, even in my flivver, I would have to hurry to catch up with him. On the mule, he could short-cut through swamps, while I would have to follow the King's road, and it was almost twice as long that way.

Belinda and Christine were waiting beside my car, and when I cranked up they climbed in. Behind us, a few seconds after we started, I heard the grinding of the Mercedes starter and the soft whine of the gears, then the glare from its headlights was thrown against my windshield.

It was a four-mile drive from the Clayburn farm to Barnes's place, and when we got there the house was dark. I realized that it might not be an easy job to locate that still. Behind the house a pine hammock started and it ran, broken only by an

occasional cypress swamp, all the way to Cypress Spoon, five miles north, and spread out in fan shape to the river, three miles west. It might be like trying to locate a needle in a haystack, but then, again, it mightn't.

Alvina and Anatole Logan drove up as I got out of my flivver.

"What are you lookin' for?" Alvina called out.

"Your brother's still."

And she laughed. The lamp on the Mercedes dashboard was shining in the young fellow's face, and I could see that he was anxious. He had come out to have a good time, to be amused by a wake, and he wasn't exactly hungry for this kind of excitement. There was trouble in the air, and I suppose, with the caution of every city man, he was picturing himself subpoenaed as a witness and wondering if he hadn't better be moving along.

The twins walked around the house and started for the woodshed in back. I had parked the flivver so that the headlights illuminated one side of the house and the shed, and as Jim and Ed came around and into the white light, a head popped out of the woodshed door.

I started running toward it, and as I did so Bad Eye Eely came ducking out. He made for the timber as fast as his long legs would carry him.

Then Jeff Barnes appeared in the doorway, and he had a shotgun in his hand. The headlights glittered in his eyes, and he certainly looked to me like an ugly customer. If I hadn't thought Jeff Barnes was a bad egg before this, I thought so now.

"I'm goin' to shoot!" he yelled.

I stopped where I was, with my finger itching on the trigger of old man Clayburn's revolver. With the law behind me, I was dying to shoot that fellow. But I didn't. I didn't have a chance.

Jim and Ed walked straight up to him. They knew more about that shotgun of his than I did. They knew the hammer spring was broken.

Ed made a grab for the gun and when Jeff snatched it up to use as a club, Jim hit him. The gun dropped, and Jeff Barnes started to run. Ed hit him as he went

past, and Jeff stumbled, and when he picked himself up, Ed kicked him.

The last seen of Jeff Barnes he was loping toward the Vingo depot. It was misty, and he hadn't gone very far before he was swallowed up. A northbound train was due in a few minutes, and I suppose he caught it. He has never been seen in Vingo since, and I am pretty sure he never will.

We found a railroad lantern in the woodshed and we lit it. There was no still in the woodshed.

"You boys have been hanging around here enough to have some suspicion where it is," I told Ed and Jim. But they didn't know.

"I've smelled mash around here, just like I smell it now," Ed said.

Christine and Belinda came in, and they sniffed the air. They both smelled mash, but there was no still in the woodshed. Nothing but some rusty old tools, a pile of crocus sacks, another pile of empty cans and a fifty-gallon oil barrel.

It didn't dawn on us for a long time how Jeff Barnes had been fooling us.

Alvina came to the door with Mr. Logan and taunted us.

"You'll never find that still," she said. "It's too well hidden." Then she and her Northerner went back to the car.

It was Belinda who made the discovery. She picked up one of the empty cans from the pile and looked at the label. The label said lye.

She was frowning as she turned the can over and over.

"Why did they use so much lye?" she wanted to know, but no one answered. The truth was beginning to dawn on us all. We ought to have guessed it sooner, but our minds were on something else. What we were looking for was a copper worm.

Belinda dropped the can and picked up the lantern. She lowered it into the oil barrel.

"Here's the still," she said, and we crowded around the barrel and looked.

There was still a little stuff in the bottom of the barrel—fifty pounds or so of new sugar. Bad Eye Eely was probably starting another mess when Jeff came back from the wake.

"They didn't 'still it at all!" Belinda cried. "They mixed the batch in this charred oil barrel and they put in lye to make it work fast!"

And that was the truth. The "double-distilled corn liquor" that Jeff Barnes had been peddling around, hadn't even been distilled once. The mixture had simply been placed in the barrel and allowed to work. Lye was added to hasten the chemical action.

And that was the stuff Alvina had recommended for babies to drink—rank poison! That lye gave the stuff a "kick"—and it ate out the lining of a man's stomach and put the devil into his heart. Boiled carrot juice had given it that beautiful honey color.

Belinda gave the barrel a vicious little kick.

"Smash it!" she said.

Her mood needed something to smash; so Ed rolled the barrel outside and took an ax to it. And when the barrel was reduced to splinters, we started back toward my flivver.

"You tell her, Buck," said Christine, "not to come back to our house. You tell her that if she comes back to our house I'm going to shoot her!"

The four of them climbed into my flivver, and I strolled on toward the Mercedes. Alvina and young Logan were standing beside it, very close together, and Alvina was doing the talking.

I remember that a rain like fine mist was falling, and that the steam from the swamps was creeping up, clouding the air. Here and there through the thickening mist spots of fire were burning. They were old stumps, rich in turpentine, still smoldering from a bush fire we had had a few days before; but they gave a ghostly air to the picture.

It was hot and close—oppressive. The rainfrogs were calling in a high-pitched shrill. It was so high that sometimes when it stopped for a moment you wondered if it hadn't gone into one of the upper registers above sound.

And I remember Alvina's voice. It was no longer lovely and velvety. It was clear and strident and every now and again it broke. It was the voice of desperation.

She was pleading with him, and she paid no attention to me when I came up.

"We're going back to the Clayburns," I said. "And you're not going back there, do you understand?"

I think she heard my voice, but not the sense of what I was telling her. She glanced around impatiently, as if she were conscious only that some one, or something, was disturbing her, but beyond that she paid no attention.

Anatole Logan was holding her off at arm's length. He had her by the shoulders, and she seemed to be struggling to get closer to him, and all the time she was talking. It wasn't good to hear.

"I don't care, I don't care," she was saying in that wild, desperate voice. "You know we love each other. You know we've been waiting to find each other all our lives. Tony! Why are you acting this way? Don't you love me?"

"Of course I love you," the young fellow said, but he sounded bored. It was just the way a man of experience would tell a girl he loved her when he didn't and wanted to get away. His eyes were straying to the steering wheel of the Mercedes, and I knew he was pretty tired of this little swamp flirtation he had started.

"And I love you, Tony," Alvina got out in that strange, desperate voice. "I never loved anybody before. I never knew what love was. And we're going away together, and we're going to be happy."

She ended on a harsh note, and you knew very well that she was deathly afraid they weren't going away together. Her sensitiveness to the fleeting moods in a man told her that the thing she was hoping for was apt not to come true; that he had never been more than faintly interested in her, and that he was growing more and more bored with her.

"There's nothing to keep me now," she started in again. "So we can start. Why are you waiting, Tony?"

"Where do you want me to take you?" he said, after a long wait.

"Anywhere!" she cried. "Anywhere! Just so long as we're together. Oh, I love you so!"

He looked a little more bored than be-

fore. I don't think Anatole Logan was more than fractionally to blame for what was happening or for the dreadful thing that happened in the end. She had thrown herself at him in the beginning, and she was throwing herself at him now.

Well, I suppose it was a brand new and sickening experience to her. He was probably the first man she had ever known who wouldn't have eaten out of her hand and made a perfect fool of himself five minutes after he met her; her training hadn't prepared her for a disappointment like this. She had always got what she wanted from men, and here was one who wasn't going to give her what she wanted, and she was simply frantic with desperation.

It was all expressed in their attitudes. There he was, holding her away from himself at arm's length, and there she was, inclining toward him and wanting to hold him in her arms.

"I think we'd better think it over," the young fellow said in a steady, reasoning voice.

"But there isn't anything to think over!" she wailed.

"There's my wife," he said. "I can't leave her back at the hotel worrying, can I? I told her I'd be back in time for dinner, and it must be almost midnight."

"But you love me more than you do her," Alvina cried.

He didn't answer, and he looked away from her.

"Oh, you've got to!" she burst out. "What am I going to do? You do love me! You do want me! You do!"

"I'll drive out in the morning," he said reasonably, "and we'll talk everything over. This night's been too much for you. You're upset."

"You're evading me!" she snapped. "You've got to give me an answer. You've got to choose between me and your wife, and you've got to choose now."

"Alvina," he said quietly, "I love my wife, and I've never given you any grounds for thinking that I don't."

She backed away from him, into the darkness.

"But what's to become of me?" she cried.

"I don't know. I only know it makes me

sick to realize that things have happened this way."

I heard the two fox terriers growling beside Alvina. But I couldn't see them, and I couldn't see Alvina. Anatole Logan hadn't moved out of the light from the dashboard lamp, and he looked pretty sick. He was a playboy, and he was willing to play, and it upset him when things turned serious.

He stared into the misty darkness where Alvina had retreated, and I started back toward the flivver.

"Listen," he said in the voice you use in trying to soothe a child whose feelings are hurt; "listen, Alvina. I'll be out early in the morning—bright and early—and we'll talk everything over."

"Oh, my God!" said Alvina. It seemed to be wrung from her. Then a strangling sound, as if she were choking back sobs. She was moving away.

Looking back now, I am sure she had no idea where she was going. She must have been blind with fury at having any man refuse to grant any of her wishes, and to this inward blindness were added her tears of rage.

She was simply running—running away from that disappointment. The poison of her anger, I suppose, made her want to do something violent, as Christine's had an hour or so before.

The man from the luxury belt had turned his head and was staring off in the direction of her running footsteps and the yelping little dogs. His mouth was hanging open. Maybe he never heard that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and maybe he was just dazed and bewildered. I don't blame him.

But I didn't think about him for very long. I was thinking of Alvina. I was wondering if she knew where her feet were carrying her. She was making straight for that swamp—probably because she had started in that direction.

My mind has a tendency to skip this part. The mist and the darkness made it impossible to see. I could only picture what was happening from the sounds. The splashing of her feet in the black slime as she reached the end of the swamp. And I knew that she was running.

Now I can see the rest, although all that happened then was her scream—a horrible scream that bubbled off into a silence even more horrible. I can see that slimy monster rising up and his brutal jaws opening and closing with a clash the way they do.

The instant she screamed I knew that that had happened. I could not have heard that low, quivery whistle. It came into my mind because it meant death. Always it meant death.

Now the fox terriers were yelping. They came racing back to here we stood. Every hair on their bodies was bristling, and saliva was running out of their mouths. They had glimpsed the nearest thing to hell that a dog can ever glimpse on this earth, and they were mad with terror. They actually seemed to be puffed out with it.

"You'd better go," I said to the handsome Northerner. "And you'd better never come back."

And he drove out of Vingo in that gray panther of a car as if a thousand demons were behind him!

XI.

GLANCING back over what I have written, I wonder if I have done what I set out to do. I wanted to tell you about the effect that one lone, beautiful girl had on a twenty or twenty-five square mile area of Florida swamp country—how Alvina Barnes gave us a gorgeous view of Hades with the doors wide open—and how those same swamps, in the end, struck back at her.

No one went near that spot—the Barnes place—for a matter of six months. The negroes said it was haunted, that ha'nt lights hovered around the kitchen windows and that, on misty nights, you could hear a faint, dismal whistle.

But at the end of six months, one bright, sunny morning in spring, the Randolph twins and I paid that swamp a visit and we carried thirty-thirty rifles. But we did not use them. After a dry winter, the swamp was bone-dry. The sand in the bottom of it was like talcum powder; it rose up in little puffs when you put your foot down. We found the cave, but it couldn't have been occupied for months. There wasn't a track.

I don't know why we weren't more dis-

appointed. We were really relieved. He had found his way to the river, and he would never come back.

I stood where the tough St. Augustine grass gave way to the shallow cup of the swamp's edge.

"Here," I said to myself, "she must have been standing when—" I could still feel as sick as I had felt that night, when those dogs came trotting back, all puffed out with terror. That lovely, soulless thing!

Well, the rest is quickly told. I sold the commissary and my house—at a loss—soon afterward and moved away. Vingo had too many associations; too many things came to mind on misty nights when the rain-frogs started to shrill.

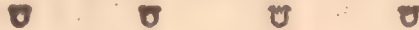
To all appearances, Vingo soon became

normal again. Talk of sorcerers and sorcery was no longer heard in the quarters. And one day the Randolph twins started work again on the twin bungalows on the river. It was the same day that Belinda and Christine came into the commissary, each wearing a familiar ring made of genuine white gold and set with a real chip diamond.

Wasn't I surprised? Did I think they were ever going to forgive them? They were bursting with eagerness to know.

Oh, sure, I was surprised—even if the news had trickled in on the grapevine telegraph six hours earlier. As for wondering whether or not they were ever going to forgive them—well, I am getting pretty cynical. I am learning that time can heal almost anything.

THE END



IN THE DUSK

SILENTLY I plodded on
 Past one wet street corner and another,
 Chill rain whipped into my face,
 Driving sullenly against—around me.
 Then, as a breath taken very swiftly,
 I had found a Thought;
 Elusive—and so exquisite,
 So vivid and so thrillingly alive,
 That a burning urge possessed me
 To reach any shelter
 Wherein I could be in stillness
 Until before me throbbed in words
 The wild and joyous meaning
 Of that to which my heart was clinging breathless.
 Now that I have made myself
 (So far as any power in me may compass),
 A mechanism poised and sensitive
 Through which it had created for itself
 Living expression.
 Wonder strangely rises
 Whether it was I myself who found this Thought,
 Or whether it had not been waiting there,
 Hugging itself closely on a rainy, windy corner,
 Until it leaped forward,
 Having found me?

Aldis Dunbar.



Dinner for Cynthia

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "Regular People," "A Noise in Newboro," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

CYNTHIA and her cousin, Nora Blair, who share an apartment, are nearly out of funds and are too proud to ask aid of their wealthy uncle, who disapproves of their choice of artistic careers. Cynthia's fiancé cancels a dinner engagement with her on the very evening that a hearty dinner would have been most welcome to her.

Meanwhile, the mother of the wealthy Neville Ronalds believes that a Miss Blair has designs on her son's millions, through marriage. Cynthia gets the letter meant for her cousin and decides to call at the Ronalds home on a pretext, simply to get invited to dinner. Mrs. Ronalds and her mother are greatly impressed with Cynthia's refinement. The young lady makes such a hit with the eccentric grandmother that the latter absolutely refuses to let Cynthia depart from the Ronalds mansion. Cynthia begins to think the old lady is deranged.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GUEST.

"AND if you knew me better," concluded Mrs. Stone, "you'd know that that's exactly what you're going to do!"

Her hard smile challenged Cynthia—and it may be said that Cynthia, although she devoted a vain three or four seconds to summoning a hard and defiant, even a contemptuous smile of her own, turned distinctly chilly.

Cynthia, you see, felt that full under-

standing of Mrs. Stone had been given her at last; the lady, not to put too fine a point on the thing, was demented! Perhaps, for the matter of that, her daughter was also demented; she hadn't looked any too bright during their brief conversation. Possibly they'd both been crazy for years—possibly the hinted eccentricities of Neville himself were the sickening fruit of this unwholesome ancestry.

Although this strange, elderly person didn't look crazy, did she? Her eye was clear and cold and distinctly intelligent.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 18.

But some forms of insanity were like that, weren't they? The unfortunates looked and acted and talked in perfectly sane fashion, that is, except on one or two subjects. So it seemed rather plain that Cynthia had encountered one of these cases; having got herself into all this, it was now her high privilege to get herself out of it!

Just what did one do when dealing with a demented person? To the best of Cynthia's belief, one humored such a person. Cynthia's smile may not have been the steadiest smile in the world, but it was inordinately bland.

"Why, yes, of course!" she said heartily. "Eh?"

"I mean that I'll be awfully glad to stay. It—it was foolish of me to want to go, wasn't it?"

"I considered it so, at any rate," Mrs. Stone responded, with a rather mystified grin. "I'm glad to see that you—"

"Yes, of course! Of course!" Cynthia cried, with a high pitched little cackle that had intended to be a gay laugh. "But first, you know, I must get my handkerchief!"

"Eh?"

"Yes, it's in my coat and my coat's in your daughter's room," the guest pursued, and turned in the most carefully leisurely fashion toward the door again. "Just sit down and wait! I won't be a minute, you know."

"Well, before you go, will you do me one favor?" the elder lady asked, grimly.

"Oh, I'd be delighted!" Cynthia cried enthusiastically.

"Then stop thinking that I'm a damned lunatic!" Mrs. Stone rasped. "I'm not, I assure you. I'm a woman whose patience and endurance have been worn right down to the bone with this Neville rot—and this time, since he really has hooked up with a real girl, *I'm going to get it settled!* I swear to Moses, I think I'll see you married to him before ever I let you out of my sight!" cried Neville's grandmother, as emotion overcame her for the moment.

"But I'm not a maniac!"

There was, as ever, something extremely convincing about Mrs. Stone. Gazing at her, Cynthia's terror departed suddenly;

hot anger welled up in its place, too. Her own eyes flashed.

"Then, if you're really not, I'm leaving!" she stated.

"Well, you're doing nothing of the kind!" barked from Mrs. Stone.

Cynthia laughed unpleasantly.

"My dear lady," said she, "I have no doubt that you're the tyrant of your family, but you don't terrorize me, even a little bit, and you can't play the tyrant with *me!*"

"Spirit, hey?" chuckled Mrs. Stone.

"Lots of it!" snapped Cynthia. "Good night."

"Wait, my dear! Don't force me to *keep* you here!"

Cynthia whirled about in quite savage amazement.

"Why, you're—you're incredible!" she cried, with none of that respect which is due an older person. "If I don't choose to remain of my own accord, how on earth could you keep me here?"

"How? Why, in fifty thousand different ways, you little simpleton!" barked Mrs. Stone, her own temper slipping slightly. "And don't use just that tone to me, if you please. You're lovely, but you're an extremely impudent young woman!"

Cynthia Blair drew herself up frigidly and laughed—yes, laughed right into the face of Mrs. Stone! It was exactly as if she had snapped her fingers under that lady's nose.

"And you," she said distinctly, "are a very stupid and preposterous old lady and I—"

"What was that?" gasped Neville's grandmother.

"I'm sure you heard me."

"I did—the preposterous—yes!" Mrs. Stone forced out, with evident difficulty. "We're all that, more or less. But what was that other word?"

"That other word," said Cynthia, from her elevation, "was—*stupid!* And now—and for the last time, this time—good night!"

She turned away—yet even as she turned she noted the newest change in Mrs. Stone. The lady's anger seemed to have subsided as swiftly as it had risen. The blaze, which

had been quite fearsome for a few seconds, was gone from her eyes. She was really only an elderly lady, leaning on a cane.

"Very well, my child," she said gently, with a small forlorn note, too. "If you must go, you must. I don't blame you. I—I don't get on very well with the rest of the race."

Despite herself, the tender Cynthia paused in the doorway and looked back. The elder lady was leaning on her old black walnut dressing table now, smiling wearily. Yes, and she was holding out her hand.

"Come and say good night to me, my child, and forgive me," she said very gently. "I'm rather a ridiculous person, I suppose, but I feel deeply about the boy, and when a girl as sweet as you—oh, well. I—I beg your pardon, Cynthia."

"And I—I beg yours, too," Miss Blair stammered, and blushed as she shook the big hand. "I didn't mean to speak that way."

"You were justified, youngster," Mrs. Stone sighed, drearily. "You'll come and see me again, soon?"

"If you really want me to."

"I do. The sooner the better, my dear. And I tell you honestly that the day you and Neville are married will be the happiest day of my life!"

She patted Cynthia's arm, she patted her side, plainly enjoying the firm, young feel of her—and Cynthia considered swiftly. Really, there was no sense at all in saddening this rather sad woman by insisting upon telling the actual truth. A graceful exit was all that the moment demanded.

"Well, I hope that you'll know a lot of days even happier than that!" she laughed, tactfully enough.

The hand had dropped away from her. Mrs. Stone nodded and turned her somewhat gloomy gaze to her dressing table, with its plain fittings and its odd bronze jewel case. She smiled suddenly.

"Wait just one minute more, my dear!" she cried. "That infernal boy didn't provide you with an engagement ring, did he?"

"He—why, no!"

"Well, I've done about everything for him since he was born, except eat his

meals," Mrs. Stone grunted, and opened the jewel-case. "I'll have to do that for him, too."

"Oh! Please, no!" Cynthia cried.

"Wait till you see it! Wait till you see it!" the lady chuckled. "It'll batter its way through even your shyness, this ring will! This *ring*, Cynthia! This is a ring that was given to my father by some rajah or other in India, when father went around the world in eighteen-seventy-three! Couple of jewel hounds looked at it, just last winter, and one of 'em offered me twelve thousand dollars for it. Little bit of a thing, too, the ring part—wouldn't any more than hang on the nail of father's little finger. But the three stones—well, where the Sam Hill is that thing?"

One large forefinger poked among trinkets that clinked. Cynthia, who harbored no slightest suggestion of desire to go forth with twelve thousand dollars' worth of ring on her finger, racked her rather weary brain for the simplest manner of declining the gift without giving offense. Now, however, the lady was straightening up with a sudden:

"Hang it! Cornelia took it to the safe deposit with the other small stuff! I'd forgotten that."

"Well, I'm glad!" Cynthia laughed relievedly. "I'm too careless to have expensive jewelry."

"This wouldn't have been any too good for you, my dear," said Mrs. Stone. And her gaze roved back to the jewel-case and rested there. Rather idly, she turned over the pieces; then she turned them over with rising excitement, muttering the while. "Well, where's *that* gone?" she demanded.

"Is—is something else missing?"

"Yes—pin!" grunted the elder lady and unceremoniously dumped some two dozen old-fashioned pieces to the surface of her table and poked afresh. "This household, y'know!" she said savagely. "It'll drive me crazy in good earnest before I die and get out of it!"

"But your—your pin probably went—"

"It did not!" snapped Neville's grandmother. "I always keep that near me and—Cynthia!"

"Yes?"

"Will you please press that button—no, the white one—and get my fool maid here?"

Cynthia pressed it.

The poking process went on and on, until Mrs. Stone had spread all her bits of glittering, old-fashioned jewelry apart. She glared at them with anger plainly rising—and the door opened and a lean and sour-looking maid of middle age appeared.

"Graves!" snapped her mistress. "You cleaned up in here to-day?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you, by chance, open my jewel casket?"

The maid stiffened.

"I've never yet opened it in all the nine years I've been with you, Mrs. Stone, except that you sent me to fetch something from it!"

"Aha? Anna's still sick, isn't she? You swept the floor?"

"She is and I did, ma'am."

"Well, did you see my lace pin knocking around anywhere?"

"Which one, Mrs. Stone?"

"The big one, of course!" Mrs. Stone cried.

"With — with the large diamond, ma'am?" gasped the maid, and paled and grew instantly concerned.

"Yes."

"I didn't—didn't see it, Mrs. Stone!"

"I'm not *quite* sure I like the way you say that, Graves," the elder lady said meditatively, and jabbed the woman with her eyes.

"But you can't possibly mean that—"

"Never mind what I mean! That pin's gone. Where is it?"

"But I don't know, Mrs. Stone!" cried the maid excitedly. "Perhaps it's on the gown you wore last night, ma'am. I'll look and—"

"You needn't. It's not there. I took it off myself and put it back in the box. You saw me do it!"

"I did—I did!" Graves agreed, quite chokingly. "I remember that now, Mrs. Stone!"

"Well, what's become of it, then? What's become of it, Graves?"

"I—I don't know!"

"Paid three thousand dollars for that

stone, and it's been my favorite geegaw for a quarter of a century!" Neville's grandmother explained darkly to Cynthia, and whirled back on the maid with: "Don't distress yourself quite so visibly, Graves! I think you're overdoing it a bit!"

"But—"

"Look here, woman! You're in full charge of my effects, and have been for years. Enough said! If there's any sort of clean breast you want to make, make it now and make it quick, and very likely nothing worse than dismissal will be ahead of you, so that I get back the pin itself. Well? Well?"

The pallid maid spoke only with the greatest difficulty.

"Mrs. Stone," she wailed, "may I be struck dead as I stand here if I've seen that pin since you put it away last night!"

"Struck dead, eh?" the elder lady muttered and smiled grimly as she scratched her chin thoughtfully. "Meant to sound convincing, I suppose, whether it is or not. Who else has been prowling around in here, Graves?"

"Not a soul!"

The scratching process went on a little longer; then Mrs. Stone shrugged her big shoulders.

"Ring for Towner!" she snapped; and demanded of Cynthia: "Can you beat it?"

"Oh, the pin's around somewhere, I'm sure," Cynthia smiled soothingly, and bent and searched the floor around the dressing-table. "A thing like that could hardly—"

"Cynthy, in this house, anything can happen—anything!" Mrs. Stone cried irascibly. "You mark my words—*anything*! Did you ring for Towner, Graves?"

"I—I did!" the maid stuttered.

Cynthia Blair sighed lightly. Five minutes ago, escape had been an accomplished fact; now, since one hardly deserted a perturbed elderly lady in such a crisis, it seemed that she would have to remain for another ten or fifteen minutes, until the wretched pin had revealed itself. Not that it mattered so very much, because Billy was still dining next door and she did not wish to phone him until most of his talking had been done. But there was something shivery and ominous about this establish-

ment, and she yearned for the outer air and—

"Where's Towner, Graves?" Mrs. Stone was asking. "Not dead, is he? Then—oh, you're here, are you?"

The butler bowed and even smiled faintly.

"Been entertaining some of your crooked friends, Towner, since last night—or late last night?" the elderly lady demanded.

"So far as I know, I have no crooked friends, ma'am," Towner responded, with the utmost good cheer.

"Been in this room while I was out of it, since last night?"

"This is the first time I've been here in two days, ma'am."

"Quite sure about that?"

"Quite."

"Well, somebody's stolen my large diamond lace pin, Towner. Who did it?"

There was a saint-like quality in the resignation of Towner's smile as his eyes began a search of the floor.

"If I may be permitted to say so, madam, it wasn't stolen at all," he submitted. "I think most likely it's fallen to the floor and been brushed into a corner or under something and—"

"Hunt for it, then!" directed Mrs. Stone.

Grimly, majestically, she stood and waited, while maid and butler dropped to their knees and crawled about, lifting rugs, moving chairs, shaking the sparse draperies at the windows. Graves, muttering incessantly, made for the clothes-press and shook out gown after gown. Towner, other possibilities exhausted, made an undisguised survey of Mrs. Stone herself, and then murmured rather blankly:

"Well, it's not about, ma'am!"

"No, I know it isn't; but it's going to be!" the lady cried violently. "I like that pin, and I'm going to have it back! Pay attention to me! What strangers have been in this house since yesterday?"

"Why—why, none at all, ma'am. Mr. Forbes was here, and I brought up the messenger boy later, but he wasn't at this end of the house, and, as you might say, he wasn't out of my sight at any time. There hasn't been a single stranger—" pursued Towner, and his kindly eye turned

suddenly on Cynthia Blair and, as suddenly, away from her again. "Not what could be called a stranger, ma'am!" he concluded.

His momentary glance had not been lost on Mrs. Stone, however. That lady's eagle gaze, alive with amazed suspicion, whisked to Miss Blair.

"Upon my soul! You're *not* exactly an habituée of the place, are you?" she observed.

"I—I—no, I'm not!" Cynthia stuttered, and for no reason under the sun turned a brilliant crimson. "And there's a very unpleasant implication in that remark of yours which I will not tolerate for an instant!"

"Well—hoity-toity!" cried Neville's grandmother, and faced her squarely. "Cheeks all afire, eh? And tongue altogether too ready! Bad! Bad!"

"Mrs. Stone," the caller managed, "please do not dare suggest—"

"Young woman, I dare anything that I choose to dare!" Mrs. Stone interrupted, too calmly. "You've been accused of absolutely nothing, and you're defending yourself quite frantically. Which all but clinches the thing in itself, by gad!" said the lady, and came nearer to Cynthia. "Miss Blair, in just so many words, I demand that you return my lace pin!"

"I—I haven't your beastly pin!" Cynthia choked.

"You'll permit my maid to search you?"

"I will not!" cried the visitor. "If you or your maid or your butler dares to lay just one finger on me—"

"Please yourself," Mrs. Stone said briefly. "Police matron 'll probably make a better job of it, anyway. Telephone for a detective or an officer, Towner!"

"Oh, but ma'am—such a young girl—"

"Young or old, Towner, nobody can walk in here and steal three thousand dollars' worth of jewelry and get away with it!" the forceful woman replied harshly. "Ring up the police!"

In Cynthia's make-up there was, fortunately enough, at least some of that quality which steadies one in the face of dire emergency. Three seconds, and the whole immediate future flashed before her—the ghastly trip to a police station, the formal

charge which this impossible old creature would doubtless make, perhaps even a night in a cell, vindication, of course, but a flashy newspaper story as well—after which, to one of Cynthia's mold, even vindication would not mean much. Then she spoke:

"Don't do it, Towner. I—I've never been quite so humiliated in all my life, but if you wish to have me searched, do so!"

"Hah! Got it tucked away already, have you?" said Mrs. Stone. "Well, my eyes are as quick as the next fellow's, and I never saw you do it!"

"Graves," cried Cynthia, "will you please do as she wishes?"

"I—yes, miss!" the sour maid muttered, almost sympathetically, as she approached.

"Look for pockets first," clicked determinedly from the elder lady. "Probably she has none in that dress. More likely to be in one of her shoes or somewhere in her stockings. See if she's got 'em rolled, Graves. If you can't find it without undressing her, Towner 'll have to get out and she'll have to be undressed."

"There's—just the one pocket on this side, ma'am," Graves mumbled, for she had no liking at all for this kind of performance. "Nothing but her handkerchief in there, Mrs. Stone."

"Well, use your wits, confound you!" the lady boomed. "She's cleverer than you are, Graves. Pull the thing out—shake it out carefully—look in the pocket while you have it out and—*ha! ha!*"

Nor was this high-pitched exclamation without its very sound reason. Graves had indeed drawn forth Cynthia's delicate little handkerchief and had indeed shaken it out.

And from its filmy folds, a glittering diamond lace pin had dropped, striking the rug with a soft little thud, lying there now all ablaze with tiny lights!

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAPPED.

"OH!" gasped Towner, and threw up his hands in boundless horror and astonishment; he was by no means the perfect butler, imperturbable under all conditions. There was something almost

broken hearted, in fact, in the fascinated stare he directed at Cynthia.

"Well—well—why—" faltered Graves, and stooped and retrieved the bauble and no more than gazed blankly at it for a little.

Mrs. Stone, however, was not even slightly jarred by the discovery. Her eyes were sad, now, and her diminutive smile was cynical and weary. She shook her head as she considered Cynthia.

"The same old story—the same old story!" she muttered. "There isn't a soul in the world that can really be trusted! There's not—"

"Stop—stop that!" Cynthia cried, wildly, for breath had at last returned to her. "I never—you know that I never took that pin! I never laid eyes on the filthy thing before! I never—"

"And still, it was rolled up in your handkerchief, wasn't it?" Mrs. Stone inquired, and the cynical quality of her smile grew more marked.

"If it was, I didn't put it there! You know that I didn't put it there! It—it *wasn't* there! This woman must have had it in her hand and—"

"Tah!" sighed Neville's grandmother, as Graves drew back indignantly.

"Oh, but I can't think how you ever come to do it, miss!" Towner exploded, brokenly. "I can't think what drove you to this! You're not a natural-born criminal, I'd swear! Why, you look so sweet and young—"

"Shut up, Towner; you're tiresome," Mrs. Stone said drearily. "Put the thing back in the box, Graves. Now—as to *you!*" she muttered, and her dreadful eyes bored meditatively into Cynthia's poor, frozen little soul.

Slowly, she sat down in the chair behind her, eyes never leaving Cynthia. She folded her hands upon her cane and the eyes drilled on and on, darkly, and giving no hint at all of what was going on behind them.

And at about this point, you will suggest, Cynthia should have broken into passionate, compelling protestations of her complete innocence. The fact of the matter is that, at this stage of the ordeal,

Cynthia could do nothing of the kind; indeed, had her very life depended on it, she could not have spoken. The first terrific concussion had passed now; all the damning bits of circumstantial evidence were leaping up before her and mocking her. She was innocent—yes; but three pairs of eyes had seen that incredible pin drop from her handkerchief, had seen—

"They've been telling me since childhood that I was more or less of a brute, but I've always tried to be just, at least," Mrs. Stone was saying, and her stare roved to Towner. "Um—"

"Well, I won't telephone for any police!" that person cried spasmodically. "I'll give notice before I'll do that, ma'am; I couldn't sleep o' nights if I had that to think of! Whatever they are when they go into prison, ma'am, they're done for when they come out, and a young girl like this ain't past saving or—"

"I haven't said she was!" Mrs. Stone snapped. "Miss Blair!"

"W-what?"

"Is this your first slip or isn't it?"

"Why, I—I—"

"Answer me—yes or no!" cried the inquisitor, and emphasized it with a thump of her cane.

"Then—yes! No, no! I don't mean that! I mean—"

"No, perhaps?"

"Not—not that, either!" Cynthia cried. "Don't try—try to confuse me with your trick questions! I—I—"

"Small need of trying to confuse you!" Mrs. Stone laughed dryly. "You're pretty well confused as it is. Not exactly an indication of spotless innocence, eh? Too bad—too bad! And still, fool that I am, I'll go the very limit in the way of giving you the benefit of every doubt!" she cried, in a burst of magnanimity. "Towner—and you, too, Graves!"

They inclined their heads attentively.

"I'm going to talk to this young woman alone. Meanwhile, until I give you permission, if ever, I won't have a word of this mentioned! Understand? *Not one solitary word*, even between yourselves. Remember that—and get out!"

They went. The door closed and the

latch clicked; the soft sound of footfalls died away down the corridor, and still Mrs. Stone merely gazed moodily at her guest.

But a change was coming over her. Her cynicism faded out, as did the dreadful quality of her gaze. In her eye keen amusement twinkled—just the sort of amusement, perchance, that was wont to twinkle in the eye of the red Indian as his victim complained of the scalping knife's feel. Mrs. Stone sighed enjoyably.

"*Stupid*, eh?" she said.

"What?" Cynthia faltered.

"You made the sad blunder of calling me that, didn't you?" chuckled Mrs. Stone. "What do you think about it now? Were you right or were you wrong?"

Belated illumination flared upon Cynthia's clean young mind.

"Oh, *you* did that!" she gasped. "You put that pin in my pocket when you were patting me!"

"And thank you for having the pocket. They're rare enough these days, I've noticed. Well? Do you still insist on leaving?"

"Yes, I do!" flamed Cynthia! "I think you're unspeakable! I think you're beastly and horrible and—and vile! I wouldn't stay in your loathsome house now if—"

"By crickey! You're not nearly so intelligent as you look!" Mrs. Stone put in. "What if you have no choice about staying?"

"Oh, but I have! You daren't detain me here against my will!"

"True enough, my pretty one," said Neville's grandmother. "Then again, I can't do less than point out what 'll happen to you if you go before I wish you to go."

"What?"

Mrs. Stone leaned forward; from the soles of her substantial feet to the topmost hair of her plain coiffure, she was all cold-blooded business!

"Cynthia," she said steadily, "you and that boy are in love—and engaged as I take it. Lord only knows why or how he's sworn you to secrecy, and I'm not bothering to guess my way to the truth. But I do know that I made up my mind this afternoon to get that whelp married to a

decent girl before his mother harries me into the madhouse, and when I make up my mind *things happen!* You're the de-centest thing I've seen in years, and I'm going to keep you here till Neville gets home and the whole thing's settled!"

"Oh, but you're not!" Cynthia laughed, quite superciliously. She was very much herself again.

"Oh, but I am," Neville's grandmother corrected, in the same steady tone. "Because just as soon as you try leaving here, my dear, I'm going to turn you over to the police. And then I'm going to push the case just as far as it 'll go—and three very credible witnesses will have to swear that my pin really was found in your pocket, remember. It will mean a term of years in prison, and nasty notoriety that 'll follow you to the grave and wreck your whole life. Whether you're inclined to go through with all that for the sake of some fool promise I can't say, of course. Are you or—er—are you not?" the lady concluded politely.

Thrice Cynthia Blair exerted all her forces toward dragging herself out of the nightmare—toward throwing back her shoulders and raising her righteous voice and blasting the creature before her. Yet she could no more than shrink back a little farther.

"Oh!" she breathed. "Oh, I couldn't have believed that—that a thing like this *could* happen!" She was now much less herself.

"So there-you are, and the choice is all yours," the elder lady chuckled comfortably, and relaxed. "Who's boss here now, Cynthia?"

"You—you are!" the victim faltered.

"And you see your way to obliging an old woman who has been pestered beyond human endurance? That's much better, my dear. We'll consider the unfortunate episode forgotten, Cynthia. I shall never mention it. I desire that you do not mention it, either."

"But—"

"No 'buts' about it! You mention it—and I'll see it through! I swear I will! These things travel, and they grow from a murmur to a roar while they're traveling! D'ye suppose I want people whispering

that my grandson's wife is a crook? It's not to be mentioned!"

"But some day I shall have to explain—" Cynthia began wildly.

"Any explaining that has to be done, I'll do myself," Mrs. Stone said, very decidedly. "So now we understand each other. Will you shake hands, my dear?"

"I will not!" said Cynthia; and brave as her voice was for an instant, it took to trembling again. "Won't—won't you please let me go now?" she pleaded. "I give you my word of honor that I'll come back whenever you want me—I will, whether you send for me at noon or at three in the morning, I'll come instantly!"

Yes, and at last she seemed to be making an impression!

There was a sane, ordinary, human streak in the old lady, after all; she was frowning pensively and, quite visibly, considering the matter. And she was weakening just as visibly. Cynthia's heart thudded suddenly with a great, wild hope—and at about the third thud, Mrs. Stone shook her head.

"Too much of a chance to take!" she announced, with much finality. "Oh, I know—I know. You're a terribly conventional little soul, and all this seems abnormal to you. Maybe it is, but it's sheer necessity for me. You don't know what I've suffered or how I've longed to see that brat tied securely to a girl just like you. Your word of honor's probably all right, but you might be hit by an automobile or—"

"But I'd be so careful!" Cynthia protested, quiveringly.

"No use! You're here, and here you stay till I see with my own eyes that this little romance has been nailed down tight! Stop waving your hands and being ridiculous, will you? If you're in an unusual situation, it's solely because you drove me to putting you there and—well, bawl a while, then," Mrs. Stone grunted resignedly, as Cynthia's head dropped to her hands. "Maybe you'll feel better."

She hummed a cheery little tune while Cynthia wept—and wept and presently did not weep so violently, for the humming had ceased and a great conviction was beginning to steal into Cynthia: she was awakening now! She was about to sit up in

bed and glare around the dark room at home, and clutch wildly at Nora beside her and then cuddle down in Nora's arms and tell her all about the awful dream.

So Cynthia brought up her head with an assured jerk—and found Mrs. Stone regarding her with a genial expression.

"Did they study much Civil War history when you were in school, Cynthia?" she inquired.

"Did—what?"

"I was wondering how much you'd learned about—well, I suppose he was the biggest single figure in the war—about Colonel Halling," said Mrs. Stone, with a deprecatory little cough. "‘Hell-Hound’ Halling, they called him, you know."

"I—I didn't know," Cynthia faltered, and edged back another pace.

"Young woman, *there* was a man who never stopped at anything under the sun, when he considered that the end justified the means—and a man who couldn't be stopped by anything under the sun! He earned that reputation honestly."

"He did?" Miss Blair breathed.

"He did indeed, and—I'm his only daughter!" Mrs. Stone stated, with the air of one who delivers the very last word that need be said upon a subject. Also, she smiled at Cynthia. "And now, my dear, let's drop all the nonsense and just get acquainted, eh? Live with your folks here?"

"With my cousin," Miss Blair whispered.

"Did—er—somebody say you lived in a flat?"

"I don't know. We do."

"Cousin expecting you home to-night?"

"Of course she is, and she'll be perfectly wild if I don't come home!" Cynthia cried. "Nora's nearly three years older than I am and—and she takes care of me as if I were a child and—"

"Well, well, what of it? We're just as capable of taking care of you here as Nora is, aren't we? By the way, you'd better tell her you're not coming home. The phone's over there in the corner."

Cynthia gulped.

"What can I say to her? She knows quite well that—"

"Say that these delightful people insist

on your being their guest for a while, and that they won't take no for an answer!" the elder lady rapped out impatiently. "You're not an imbecile, are you?"

"I—I hope not!"

"Then use your brains! And, by the way," added Mrs. Stone, and a sharp hint of warning crept into her tone, "I'd make it sound natural, Cynthia. I'm tired and irritable to-night and I don't feel a bit like getting into any complications with cousins or—oh, call her up! Call her up!"

Cynthia, then, in a whirl of assorted emotions, called up her cousin, doing her level best to make her voice sound natural, and the first thing that Nora's own strangely gay voice cried was:

"Oh, hello, Cyn! Did you get your dinner?"

The prettier Miss Blair reeled for an instant—caught Mrs. Stone's inquiring eye—and said:

"I—no! Not yet, I mean. I—"

"Cyn, I wish you'd stuck around for another fifteen minutes! The most wonderful luck!"

"What?"

"It had to break some time, honey! I told you it had to break! Cynthia, Morse called up just before he left his office. He's bought the four little sketches I left with him and—get this!—there's ninety dollars coming to me next pay day. That's Wednesday, I think. And he wants the one I'm doing and he wants to see me at nine, sharp, to-morrow morning, to fix up some sort of contract. Isn't that marvelous?"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Cynthia cried.

"Well, wait! That's only the beginning of it! Carberry—yes, *the* Carberry!—had his secretary stop in here—she's a peach, too!—and what do you think? *He* wants me to come in at eleven in the morning and see him about illustrating a book! And—and—don't stop me yet, Cyn!" Nora hurtled on. "That isn't all! Your friend, Mrs. Wolfert, was here!"

"To—to—to see *me*?" Cynthia gasped.

"She was, indeed! And she's fired her Austrian marvel and she's ready to take you on for all five of her kids, Cynthia—you're to teach her whole darned private kindergarten! And she said—I don't know

whether I ought to tell you this or not—she said that if you'd take the piano end of some joint recital she's giving for seventy-five dollars, she'd love to have you do it. I—say, honey!" Nora laughed wildly. "I told her that, so far as I knew, you'd never played a recital for less than a hundred, and it was the truth! I said I'd do what I could with you, though." And here there was a gasp, and tears of joy seemed to be clogging Nora's utterance. "Hustle, Cynthia, so I can tell you all about it. You don't have to crash any more dinners now!"

The victim of weird circumstances steadied her voice as well as might be.

"That—that's what I called up to tell you," she said. "I'm staying here for—a little while."

"Where? At the Ronalds house?"

"Yes!"

"How long?"

"Well—overnight, anyway," said Cynthia.

"Over *night*?" demanded her cousin in quick astonishment. "What for?"

"Well—you see, these—these delightful people simply insist on my being their guest for a while, Nora. Yes, really!"

"Is the boy there—Neville?" Nora snapped. "Because I've heard of the way he makes an impression on some susceptible females, kid, and I'm hanged if I'll—"

"But he—he isn't here!"

"Then why in thunder are you staying?"

"Because they—they just won't take no for an answer!" said Cynthia.

There was a brief pause.

"I think you'd better come home now, kid!" said Nora. "That sounds funny to me."

"But it isn't! There's—there's nothing funny about it."

"I know, but you've never even seen these people before," argued Cynthia's cousin. "What's the answer, honey? Fossilized family captivated by your beauty?"

"Why, perhaps, but—" Cynthia began; and a mighty impulse swept down upon her. If in a few swift phrases she told Nora the simple truth, before Mrs. Stone could cross the room and try stopping the words, if—Cynthia glanced at Mrs. Stone very

quickly. She glanced; she caught that lady's remarkable eyes, fixed upon her as steadily and relentlessly as the eyes of any snake; she wilted—and the impulse swept on about its other concerns! "They—they just want me to stay and I—why, I'd love to stay!" Cynthia exploded! "Yes, I really must stay!"

"Well, I don't like it a little bit, somehow," Nora muttered. "It seems mighty peculiar to me, Cynthia. It—of course, you're grown up and your own mistress and all that, but—"

"Oh, it's quite all right!" Cynthia laughed strangely, for even yet she had not managed to drag her eyes from Mrs. Stone.

"Well—get home pretty early in the morning, kid," Nora said, reluctantly. "Mrs. Wolfert's going to a luncheon and she wants to see you before she starts. And I wanted to see you and tell you about all the luck we've had!"

"Well, just as soon as I get—get home—" Cynthia said, not so steadily.

"Good night, Nora."

"Good—night, honey!" said Nora.

"Settled?" Mrs. Stone queried, amiably.

"Yes."

"Good enough! Now come over and sit beside me, my dear, and—eh? Answer that confounded phone, child. If it's for me, say that I've gone to bed."

The younger Miss Blair picked up the instrument rather tremulously. It was Nora, of course, calling back to insist that her cousin return that night and—although 't wasn't Nora, was it? Towner's voice spoke:

"Miss Blair, is it, if you please?"

"It—it is!"

"There's a party calling for you, Miss Blair. A Mr. Brander!" said Towner.

"Just a moment, please."

CHAPTER IX.

ENGAGEMENTS.

"HELLO?" said another, and beloved, voice. "Cynthia?"

"Yes!" choked Cynthia.

"Bill speaking! Dearest, I'm next door, of course. Haven't a second—just sneaked

away from Morton and have to rush back. Honey, I only wanted to tell you that I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Oh—"

"Yes, I made an idiot of myself. Been thinking it over, sweetheart, and I understood, of course. Somebody there wants music lessons, but if you don't mind an awful lot, I wouldn't sign up to give 'em, dear. I tell you, Cynthia, I don't know this Neville Ronalds from Adam, but I've been hearing of him for a year and he's a bad egg. I don't want *you* anywhere near him!"

"But I shan't be! I—"

"No, I know, but if you're not running back and forth to the house there, you're sure *not* to be! And now I've got to skip back and I'll see you at ten. You'll be home long before that?"

"No!"

"What? Why not?"

"Because I—I can't see you at ten to-night or—"

"*Can't?*" William cried sharply, "Why can't you?"

"Well, I—"

"Hey? What? Damn!" William breathed, remarkably and discourteously. "Cyn, I have to leave. Cameron's coming after me. Only—you *be home at ten!*"

There was a click and William was gone.

"Who was that?" Mrs. Stone asked, comfortably.

Cynthia Blair whisked about, her lovely eyes glittering.

One second* back, she had not even suspected that such a thing was impending; now, with a rush, a fresh and more tremendous impulse was upon her and Cynthia knew that she was on the verge of a daring move. She was, in fact, about to hurl the whole truth into the very teeth of this eccentric lady in the armchair. Truth, all unsupported, had not been able to travel very far that evening, but backed by love such as Billy's and Cynthia's—the equal of which, of course, for depth and power, had never been known since the beginning of the world—truth could and should sweep aside the whole nightmare, and so set Cynthia free!

"Man?" Mrs. Stone asked suddenly.

"Yes! And—"

"And you couldn't see him at ten, either, could you?" Mrs. Stone muttered on, and suspicion leaped to her countenance and smoldered there quite threateningly. "Look here, young woman, how many strings does this bow of yours require?"

"Er—what?" Cynthia faltered.

"Cynthia, there's something I'd much better tell you now than later! If there is one thing in this wide world which I abhor and abominate, it is the woman who plays fast and loose with a good man's love! She's worse—she's a damned sight worse!—than the man who does the same thing with women!" the lady cried, hotly. "I may criticize Neville when I feel like it; that's my affair. But if I thought for one second that you were playing with him, or engaged to him because he had money and that you were even capable of being interested in any one else—by crickey, Cynthia! I'd sweat you straight into jail for stealing my pin, and you'd get less than you deserved! I would, young woman! That's a weak spot with me, that sort of thing is!" Mrs. Stone puffed in conclusion.

She also banged her cane. Cynthia merely nodded. The good old truth seemed to have retired somewhat groggily to its corner, to have something rubbed on its new bruises. Nor was the elder lady calming so very rapidly; she muttered and mumbled, shaking her head now and then. But at last she smiled grudgingly.

"Well, well! I was young myself once upon a time," she reflected. "I suppose you're too pretty not to have been a bit of a flirt," she observed, tolerantly enough. "But, Cynthia!"

"Yes?"

"It 'll be just as well to realize that you're all done with that *now!* Keep your friends, of course, but—be sure they're *only* friends. You understand what I mean?"

Miss Blair could no more than nod. The smile grew less grudging; now, indeed, as she beckoned, Mrs. Stone cast off all the severe effect and grew genial again.

"So that matter's out of the way, too," she said gently. "Now come over and sit down and tell me about yourself, child."

It's really high time that we got acquainted, you know."

Across the room Cynthia drifted rather than walked. Strangely, she had almost ceased to think.

Why, not two minutes ago, the most glorious assurance had tingled in her every fiber. Love, the all-conquering, had pointed the way. Yet even in those two minutes the remarkable Mrs. Stone had managed to convince her that by following the way she would walk straight into prison!

Incredible? Oh, yes, it was incredible enough, Cynthia conceded dizzily, but at the same time it bore all the earmarks of plain fact. Even on short acquaintance one knew that Mrs. Stone owned the rare quality of meaning exactly what she said.

She was pinching Cynthia's arm and chuckling.

"Plump as a partridge, eh?" she observed.

"W-what?" breathed Cynthia.

"As well-fed a little baggage as I ever saw!" the kindly soul pursued heartily. "Never missed a meal in your life, I'll warrant!"

Cynthia could respond with no more than a ghastly, empty smile. Mrs. Stone chuckled on.

And just next door poor Billy was wondering and wondering why she could not see him at ten, why she would not return home to-night! Yes, and as a mathematical certainty, he was doing more than just wondering, as Cynthia understood with a chill, sinking sensation. Young Mr. Brander owned a temperament more swiftly suspicious than any other Cynthia had encountered so far in her short journey through life. Not that this argued a solitary thing against the peerless beauty of Billy's character in a general way; if it was even a fault—which Cynthia declined to admit—it was entirely because of his tremendous love for her.

Acknowledging all of which, it was still a perfectly real quality; and by this time Billy was approaching a wild state. So much Cynthia knew; the exact nature of the wildness she did not know; but if her Billy was really suffering, as he must be, every bit of the blame belonged to the hateful old person beside her and—"

"Cynthia, you love the boy?" the hateful old person demanded suddenly.

"Love him?" cried Cynthia. "Why, I'd die just—" and there she subsided, since it was clear that they were not talking of the same boy.

The tiny outburst appeared to give huge gratification to Mrs. Stone, however. She laughed aloud, rumblingly, happily; she poked one big forefinger into Cynthia's tender ribs!

"That's what I wanted to know! That's what I wanted to find out!" she announced jubilantly. "I—don't know. You're so shy and silent that I was in a little bit of doubt, my child. But I'm in doubt no longer. Come here and give your old grandmother a good, big hug, young one!"

An instant, it was in Cynthia's mind to shriek aloud and leap away, clutching her pretty head. Another instant, and this seemed an impolitic thing to do; however slowly, Cynthia was learning. She complied, although not with fervor.

"You needn't be afraid of breaking me; I'm built solidly," the lady chuckled. "Gad, child! You're the timidest thing I ever saw! Not convent-bred, are you?"

"No, I—I just went through high school," Cynthia said drearily.

"And your folks thought you knew enough then and stopped educating you—and they were right!" Mrs. Stone approved, and wagged her obviously delighted head. "Just a real, old-fashioned little girl—no fool profession, no fool notion of getting into business. Not an ambition beyond a good husband and a raft of lovely young ones, eh? That's wonderful!"

"Oh, but I've studied music!" rather indignantly escaped Cynthia.

"Aha? Play for your mamma and papa?"

"I've played in concert—a little."

"Fiddle?"—

"Piano," sighed Cynthia.

Mrs. Stone sat up.

"What d'you play, honey? Jazz?"

"Music," said Cynthia.

"Well, upon my soul, you grow more priceless every minute!" said the elder lady.

"Come right downstairs and play for me!"

"But—"

"Come along! I haven't heard a piano

played decently for ten years!" Mrs. Stone said, and rose determinedly and, with one firm hand on Cynthia's arm, started for the door at once. "Neville wouldn't learn to play, you know, my dear. Dora couldn't and—"

"Neville's sister, of course. She tried; I'll say that for her. She wore out half a dozen pretty husky teachers, but it wasn't any use. Tom Dale—Dora's husband, I suppose you know—he plays a little, but I can't stand much of it. He knows four pieces, and they all sound like a lady powdering her nose, to me—and nothing else. I'll hang on to the banisters myself, going down here!"

Well, they seemed to have attained the parlor floor of the huge place again and Cynthia paused and gazed longingly at the wide front door and wondered if she dared—and then ceased wondering, for Mrs. Stone had pulled up short in her progress and was waiting for her.

Not the most profound person alive, perhaps, Cynthia could nevertheless come very near to losing herself in her music. And this was an absolutely wonderful piano! It was the very thing she had so long planned purchasing with the first saved thousand dollars. Cynthia ran her nimble fingers over the keys and, all things notwithstanding, thrilled. There was a store of lighter classics in her brain, graven there through conscientious years of work; so Cynthia played for Mrs. Stone—and played and played.

Behind her, after a long time, there was a grunt of:

"Why the Sam Hill doesn't Cornelia come down and listen to this?"

And after that there was a thumping, as Mrs. Stone departed; Cynthia played on, eyes half-closed, head too tired for very much thinking.

"Ahem!" said Towner, for the third time.

Cynthia started and turned.

"I beg pardon for interrupting, miss, but there's a gentleman to see you—a Mr. Brander?"

"He's here?" Cynthia gasped.

"Yes, he's here!" replied William himself, as he arrived in the music room and

thrust Towner aside without a hint of ceremony. "You don't have to remain! Disappear!"

The butler nodded amazedly. Cynthia, a mere tremble of joy, could no more than stare at her beloved for the moment. William, resplendent, adorable, in his evening togs, was bareheaded and without overcoat; more, William's eye held much fire, of a dark and ominous quality.

"Yes, I dropped everything and came in!" he snapped! "What are you doing it for, Cynthia?"

"Doing, Billy—doing—"

"Yes! You've played every last thing that you know I hate—every last one! You—I'll swear you're doing it to mock me, Cynthia!"

"But it never even occurred to me that you could hear through—through these thick walls!"

"Hear! Why, we're sitting within six or eight feet of that piano!" Mr. Brander pursued, almost savagely. "Cynthia, I'm doing what I can to keep my head on my job. I don't know how far I'm getting, but—but not very far, from the way Morton's looking at me! I can't think of what I'm saying when you're carrying on like this!"

"But I'm not carrying on, Billy!"

"Or even when I know you're in here—and you're not here for just a casual business visit, because your hat and coat aren't even in sight!" pursued the too alert William. "Cynthia, this is no place for you to be."

"I—"

"Not ten minutes ago, they were talking about this Neville beast, in there!" young Mr. Brander fumed on. "He's known as—well, I won't even tell you about it, but I want you to get out of here! I want you to go home!"

"I can't go home!" cried Cynthia.

"You—what did you say? You *can't*?"

"No, because—oh, Billy! dearest, listen to me and—"

"See here, Cynthia! I can't listen to any explanations now—it'd take too many of 'em ever to make me understand why you came in the first place. That's something we'll have to have out later on. I came in here to start you home—I didn't

even wait to put on a hat and coat. I—why, Cynthia, they must think I'm a nut, the way I've been acting there!"

"But Billy—"

"And now I've got to rush back and try to act natural, or pass up the only real job that ever tried to grab me," William pounded on, his bitterness increasing with the seconds. "You might have been a little bit more thoughtful about this, Cynthia! You might have stopped to think a moment, and you'd have known that, to-night of all nights, I need all the wits I've got. And you know how much I love you and how much I worry about you—and how sure I was that we had no secrets at all from each other or—"

"We haven't, Billy! I haven't!" Cynthia cried, agonizedly.

"Well, you may be sure I have none from you, but—I never even knew you were acquainted with this family."

"I'm not, Billy! I—"

"Well, have you taken a job here?"

"No!"

"Then how in—"

"Billy, *she's coming!*" Cynthia gasped.

William tightened all over. Given a suit of armor and a nice lance, and he would have looked exactly like an old-time knight about to defend his lady.

"Who is? Who's frightening you?" he snarled, as he sped toward Cynthia.

"Fri—fri—nobody!" Cynthia hissed.

"And don't come so close to me, Billy!"

"Why not?"

"And don't put your arms around me or—or kiss me or anything like that!" the remarkable young woman whispered further. "No, I can't tell you why now, but I will just as—"

"Well, who the dickens says I can't put my arms around you?"

"Billy, do you want to ruin my whole life?" Cynthia breathed, brokenly. "Then stand—stand over there!"

The astounded William backed away a little, and turned at the sound of steps and glanced inquiringly at Jane Stone, and then stared fixedly, uncomprehendingly at the impossible little grimace Cynthia Blair was wearing.

"Er—ah—hello!" said the latter, to Mrs.

Stone. "Er—may I present Mr.—Mr. Brander, Mrs. Stone?"

The elder lady squinted and looked him over, nodding and smiling faintly.

"A friend of yours, my child?"

"Er—oh, yes, a friend! A friend!"

"Well, of course, I'm very glad indeed to know any friends of our little Cynthia."

"Our little Cynthia?" William echoed.

"Ours!" repeated Mrs. Stone.

"Where," asked William, in the most direct fashion of his sweetheart, "does she get the 'ours'?"

"Well, that—well, that's just a little joke!" Cynthia chattered, with gayety that belonged in the madhouse and nowhere else. "And now I think you'd better—better get back! Don't you? They'll be waiting for you, won't they, and you have so much to do before—before he goes?"

William closed his eyes for an instant and breathed heavily.

"I—I have—yes!" he muttered.

"Then—then we mustn't detain you or—"

"All right!" William erupted. "You needn't detain me! And it's not necessary for you to call the servants and have me thrown out on my ear, either! But what I want—"

"My dear Cynthia!" Mrs. Stone smiled, blandly.

"Ah—yes?"

"Before Mr. Brander goes. He's one of your older friends, perhaps?"

"He—oh, yes!" Cynthia said dizzily.

Mrs. Stone grew actually benevolent. Her impressive head wagged rather playfully in William's direction.

"And not in the secret, I'll venture," she chuckled. "Well now, let me see, Mr. Brander. You've nothing on for Thursday evening of next week, perhaps?"

"I—I don't know!" William gulped. "Why?"

"Because we're going to have a little, informal party here for Cynthia—I think Thursday—and we'd like to be sure of your presence. Just dinner, you know, and perhaps a little dancing afterward, by way of a very modest little home celebration."

"Of what?"

"Of Cynthia's engagement, Mr. Brander!" said the hearty old lady.

How easily one misunderstands! How readily one applies this or that to his own personal case! See William in this—to Cynthia—hideous moment.

William's eyes opened suddenly; his color rose. All the anger and the perturbation dropped from William. A moment ago, he had been a glowering, perplexed, wrathful being; now a bewildered, delighted, almost sheepish smile came to his lips. He even laughed!

"Why—well, that's different, of course!" he stammered. "I had no idea—I didn't know anybody contemplated—"

"Her engagement, Mr. Brander, to my dear grandson, Neville!" said Mrs. Stone, beamingly, very distinctly.

CHAPTER X.

THE STILLY NIGHT.

IF William Brander had accomplished one very abrupt change these last minutes, he now accomplished a second.

Rather, perhaps, William, having soared to pleasing heights, suddenly found both wings shot away with the same charge and crashed down upon the very spot from which he had arisen. His smile snapped out of existence, at any rate, and the glowering effect returned, although not so markedly. William, just then, looked more like a gentleman who, having been battered with a particularly heavy club, is still able to stand erect—and not much more than able.

This phase, however, passed within a very little time. There was stern stuff in William Brander. Breath entered him with a faint hiss, through grinding teeth; he straightened up and squared his excellent shoulders; and he was even able again to smile however terribly.

"Well, *that*," said William, with entire honesty, "is news to me!"

"Likely to be news to every one," Mrs. Stone chuckled. "They've kept it mighty quiet!"

"Mighty!" William just breathed.

And for one eternal instant, he looked at Cynthia: he waited for the burst of denial

which simply must come from those sweet lips. It did not come. Cynthia, whose hand was clawing aimlessly at the back of a chair, failed even to face him.

William drew himself up more stiffly. From him came a very small, very awful little laugh.

"Well, now at least I *do* understand!" he said. "I—I congratulate you, of course, Miss Blair!"

Cynthia nodded vaguely.

"And I'll go now!" William concluded, in an amazing yell that was really the sound of a great, wounded savage beast. "I'll go and—and—good night!"

He turned and fled, hands out before him in the most absurd way. They heard him jerk open the front door without waiting for assistance from Towner; they heard it slam again, so violently that even the substantial house vibrated for an instant. Seconds, and they heard the much fainter closing of another door—and they heard no more. William was gone.

Yes, he was *gone*! He was gone forever, as Cynthia knew very well indeed. A rare, proud being like William Brander never would return to her—after that! An instant, Cynthia's eyes flamed at the back of Mrs. Stone, who was on her way to a chair, humming contentedly; an instant, and it was in Cynthia to leap upon this accursed being and tear and claw and beat and choke until it was entirely certain that her last damage on this earth had been done. Then life seemed completely to leave the unfortunate Miss Blair; she was only a shell, swaying there, without hope, temporarily quite insensate and without even capacity for joy or for sorrow.

"That's the end of *him*!" Mrs. Stone chuckled, merrily.

Cynthia could not even nod.

"You know, my dear—I'll wager that you do know, too—that handsome young devil had his hopes of you!"

"He—oh!" shuddered Cynthia.

"Well, my word!" cried the elder lady, with growing wonder. "What a ridiculously tender little thing it is, isn't it? My child, that boy's heart isn't broken!"

"Oh—he—" Cynthia observed, by way of variation.

"Oh, fiddle-de-dee!" corrected Mrs. Stone. "His life isn't wrecked, my dear; he won't run to the nearest dock and jump off the end, you may be sure. You don't know 'em, Cynthia; I do. I know every answer in their little book! Two days from now—tah! two hours from now, if he has the chance, more likely—he'll be shining up to some other girl. He'll be looking at her just as he was looking at you, and telling her she's the first woman he ever even noticed. Any more of them like him about?"

"I—I—no, there are not!"

Mrs. Stone laughed happily.

"I asked merely for information. They don't bother me, understand. I can settle one of 'em or a dozen—or a hundred, for that matter—so that he'll no longer be in any doubt about his chances with you, my dear. Heigho!" said Mrs. Stone, and yawned amply. "Well, my daughter's gone to bed, Cynthia, so we have only ourselves to consult. Sit down again and play something lively this time—something gay and snappy, deary. I had no idea so many funeral marches ever had been composed, as you played before. What do you know that's full of pep and hilarity, Cynthia?"

"Nothing," said Cynthia.

"You tired, too?"

"Very."

"Oh, well, I'll have plenty more chances to listen to you in the years to come, please Heaven," the lady reflected. "Too tired to read to me for a while, my child?"

"I—oh, I don't care!" the guest muttered, hopelessly.

"Let's go upstairs again!" Mrs. Stone proposed, and arose quite nimbly.

She favored popular magazines of the most modern kind, it appeared—magazines, in fact, which specialized in the utmost frankness. She settled in her largest chair and contemplated the pile of them beside her, at last selecting one and tossing it to Cynthia Blair; and Cynthia read and read, droning on listlessly, lifelessly, and mercifully with no comprehension at all of what it was that she read.

Because, if ever a person's thoughts were elsewhere, that was the location of Cynthia's.

Her own heart, as she knew quite well, was broken now, to remain unhealed throughout Time. As well as if the walls had been removed, she knew what was happening next door. Billy, you see, was a very, very strong character. A life like his could know but one great love; Billy had known his and now it was dead and buried, deep and forever. Hence, he would have turned, even now, for the rest of his days, to that one other interest, business.

From this point onward Billy's whole life would be, because it could be, nothing but business. In there, doubtless, they were wondering what had changed him so, since his spectacular departure and his sudden return; they were wondering what had at last brought him so intensely to the affairs of the moment.

Well, in the years to come, they would go on wondering at William Brander, who devoted every day and every night to the affairs of his employer, trying and trying to forget—rising, until he could rise no more with that particular firm—rising still, until he was at the head of his own vast business—yes, and rising even after that, until he was unquestioned czar of his line in the whole country, a grim, silent and unsmiling man, whose gnawing tragedy few suspected and none knew. Cynthia could visualize all this just as easily as if the actual events were unfolding before her.

And presently, and oddly enough, a cooling, sane sort of feeling began to steal upon Cynthia—a strange suspicion that, somehow, good old reason had recovered consciousness and was clambering back to his throne.

She glanced up. Mrs. Stone, possibly satiated with her evening, was snoring softly. Cynthia quickened. Actually, with the lady sound asleep, it was as if a malevolent Presence had been removed from the place. Cynthia herself sighed shudderingly and dropped the magazine. She frowned, and then she smiled, for—she really was thinking again!

In fact, she was thinking rather too well. She had been trapped; that was the beginning and the end of it. At this minute she could leave the room unhindered and, if she chose to forsake hat and coat, per-

haps even the house itself. Yet, gazing upon the profile of Mrs. Stone, and recalling vividly just what Mrs. Stone had said, the doubt that that person would exact vengeance by jailing her was so small as to be almost microscopic.

Cynthia shivered again. There wouldn't be any defense, would there, except the poor, weak-kneed truth that nobody would believe? Towner and Graves would be sworn. Quite honestly they would testify that she, the only person who could possibly have taken it, had had the diamond in her pocket. And Nora—for they'd find Nora and administer the oath to Nora, and all that!—would have to say that the starving Cynthia had gone in search of a dinner. The rest of it was obvious—flamboyant newspaper stories, pleas for mercy by sympathetic souls, columns of sob stuff anent the fate of young girls who came to the great city. But a jail sentence at the end of it and disgrace for her family, which was really a very fine and sensitive old family and had never had a member in prison.

For herself, she would have been inclined to take the chance and run, just now; when it came to the thought of the rest of the folks and all the endless shame and gossip back home—although— Cynthia's gaze settled intently upon Mrs. Stone again, and, blessedly, another section of the mental fog seemed to drift away.

A new bit of understanding bore into her: whatever her own disclaimer earlier in the evening, there really could be hardly a doubt that this elderly lady was merely insane. Nobody but a crazy woman ever could have done the things that she had done to Cynthia Blair.

Well, then? Must one's whole life be shattered solely to humor the whims of a demented person? Cynthia sat up, breathing quite rapidly. Not Cynthia's life, at all events, the proprietor of that particular life concluded!

And now, as the seconds hurried along, a growing sense of outrage came to the lately bewildered visitor. It was a downright crime for the old lady's family to permit her to do things like this! A sterner, less plastic person than Cynthia would have

been out of here long before now, breathing fire, calling for lawyers to demand damages for the mental anguish inflicted.

Miss Blair arose abruptly, not making any undue disturbance, to be sure, but with much determination. In bed or not in bed, she meant to find and interview that unstable person who was Mrs. Stone's daughter; she meant to put into extremely plain language her sentiments on the whole situation. After that she meant to leave—and if she had to use force she'd take Mrs. Ronalds with her for a five-minute call on Billy Brander, next door, and have *that* horror cleared up as well!

So Cynthia pressed the button for Towner, gave one last look at Mrs. Stone, who slept sweetly as any little child, and soundlessly stepped into the corridor. She was, at last, a being in full command of herself once more, with rights and privileges that were not to be ignored.

Towner advanced with a sober smile. He glanced at Cynthia and sighed.

"You'll be wishing to be shown to your room, miss?" he asked sadly.

"What? What room?"

"On the floor above, if you please. Mrs. Stone ordered that the blue room—it used to be Miss Dora's—was to be prepared for you and—"

"I don't care to be shown to any room. I'm not staying," Cynthia said with surpassing briskness.

"Oh, but—miss!" Towner protested.

"But what?"

"Well, the—the instructions were that you were to remain, I might say."

The restored Cynthia laughed amazedly "Are you telling me that *you* have actually been ordered to prevent my leaving this house?" she demanded.

"It—it ain't the most graceful way of putting it, Miss Blair, but at the same time, the—the general idea—" Towner stammered.

"Well, I don't know whether stripes are becoming to you, Towner, but you're likely to find out, I should think, when my people hear of this. That sort of thing is criminal!"

The butler smiled, almost in admiration, and shook his head wonderingly.

"How you do carry it off, miss!" he murmured. "There's other things that's criminal, too, though."

"What?"

"Yes, miss," Towner said very firmly. "And if you'll pardon my saying so, Mrs. Stone means very well by you, and you'd ought to be very grateful, young lady. It ain't every lady that 'd be as merciful as Mrs. Stone, in a case like this."

"But—"

"I fully expected she'd send for an officer. She'd have done it if it had been any one else. It's only that you're so young and—and got so much real good in you—that she's acting like this, I'm sure. She said as much to me. I suggested that it might be as well to have your pal arrested, if he come back, and—"

"My—my pal?"

"Oh, he was back, and trying to get in, fine and formal as any gentleman you ever see!" the butler chuckled. "Twice he asked for you on the telephone, and then he came himself."

"You mean the—the young man who came when I was playing?" Cynthia asked swiftly.

"The very one, miss—as you well know. And it was as good as a play when—"

"When was he here?"

"Oh—it might be twenty minutes ago."

"What did he say?"

"Why, only that he wanted to see you on urgent personal business," the butler chuckled quite richly. "Which was quite true, I take it, him not knowing that you had nothing at all to hand him. But it was rare to—"

"And what did *you* tell him?"

Towner halted again—seemed almost annoyed.

"Just what Mrs. Stone ordered me to tell him, if he should turn up: that you'd decided not to see him any more or have anything to do with him."

"You dared—" Cynthia gasped.

"Don't look so black about it," Towner said sharply. "It's all for the best—and very extraordinary for Mrs. Stone to be taking so much trouble, I assure you."

However, Cynthia had ceased her gasping. One way or the other, it really mat-

tered not at all. She was on her way out now!

"Towner, take me to Mrs. Ronalds!" Cynthia said crisply.

"I beg pardon?"

"At once!"

"Well—may I ask what for?"

"You may not," replied the guest of the house, as patience snapped. "Take me to her immediately."

The butler shook his head dubiously.

"It so happens that Mrs. Ronalds has retired," he said. "If you'll give me your message, I'll give it to Mrs. Ronalds's maid, and she'll see if she's still awake. If she's not, it 'll have to wait till morning, Miss Blair. Mrs. Ronalds has great difficulty in sleeping, and she's most particular about not being roused unnecessarily."

"Really?" said Cynthia, and her fine little teeth bared in a furious smile. "Then I'll give you the message, Towner, and if I haven't the most definite kind of an answer inside of one minute I'll start an excitement here that will keep her from sleeping for a month. You say to Mrs. Ronalds's maid, and have her say to Mrs. Ronalds, that I've suffered all I mean to suffer at the hands of her very unfortunately afflicted mother. Say that I demand that that poor lady be placed under proper restraint *at once*—and that I demand that I be released from this house at once—and that once I'm out of here, if Mrs. Stone isn't kept away from anything and everything that concerns *me*, there'll be more trouble than this fool household ever knew before!"

The butler ceased blinking and scratching his ear, and adjusted his glasses.

"Well—the reasoning of it, everything considered, I don't quite get, miss," he submitted, "except that you're pretending to think Mrs. Stone is insane?"

"Think it! Of course she is! And it's perfectly outrageous to permit a woman like that to—"

"She's not, miss," said Towner. "She's far from that."

"Oh!" Cynthia snapped.

"But it chances that I know, miss," the butler persisted. "The lady herself brought up the question, it must be two years back

now, and had it settled quite definite and conclusive, as you might say."

"What?"

"Indeed, yes, Miss Blair," said Towner, and chuckled. "I—I don't know as it's a thing to be told, but it 'll calm you if you've such an idea. There was some notion Mrs. Stone had about certain investments, as I understood it, and she insisted on having her way. She made some forty thousand dollars out of it, I believe, in the end; but at the time it looked so queer and she was so set on it that one day Mrs. Ronalds flew in a rage and—and, as I heard, told Mrs. Stone she was crazy."

"Er—yes."

"So Mrs. Stone, having a temper of her own, said that wasn't the first time in her life some such thing had been hinted at, but that it was going to be the last. And with that, miss, she sent for the five biggest alienists in New York, and when they got here she told 'em—her very words—to cut loose with all the tests they knew and then tell her and her daughter and anybody else that might be interested whether her brains were working proper or whether they needed tinkering!" Towner chuckled on. "So they did that very thing, miss, and each time they wanted to stop she urged 'em on to try something else. They put in a matter of six hours at the job in that very room you've left."

"Yes?" said Cynthia, with growing interest and an odd little chill.

"Well, when they was all done, Miss Blair, they compared notes and agreed that a saner woman probably never lived. It seems that the old one—him with the long white whiskers, I've forgotten his name—had known her father. He said she was the living image of him, and it was a crying shame she'd ever been born a woman; he said if she'd been born a man she'd have been one of the biggest leaders of her day. And when they was going out, the young chap—Dr. Axler, was it?—who'd taken it all as something of a joke, he said to the old one that she was a sight more dangerous than if she'd been crazy: she was just what she was, and sane in addition. Anyway, they were the five biggest, and they all agreed; and she made 'em write out a re-

port that, I make no doubt, is in her desk at this minute."

"Er—yes," Cynthia said faintly.

Because she was sinking again. She had rushed so gayly toward a door that simply must open for her—and now Towner had bolted the door.

"And even so, we make a great point of never angering her, miss," he concluded softly. "She's a terrible temper, and once an idea's fixed in her mind the old boy himself couldn't stop her. I don't think she'd be liking that message to go to Mrs. Ronalds, miss."

"Pos—possibly not," Cynthia murmured, and leaned against the wall.

"You're tired, Miss Blair," the butler said kindly. "Hadn't you best go to bed now?"

"I—yes, I think so. Er—Towner—I might have a cup of tea, I suppose?"

"Well—"

"And a sandwich or two and—perhaps a piece of cake, Towner. Something like that and—"

"Well, I'm sorry indeed, Miss Blair," the butler said with a sympathetic smile, but with extreme firmness. "There's an iron-clad law in this household against eating between meals; Mrs. Stone don't believe in it. Now, if I was on good terms with the cook, I might steal up with a bite or two for you," he whispered. "But it so happens I ain't on good terms with the cook, and she'd be the first to report it to Mrs. Stone. It 'd be as much as my job's worth."

"Well, do you mean to tell me that I can't even—" Cynthia began desperately.

"Psst! Psst, now!" Mr. Towner breathed warningly, and his smile grew almost fatherly as he closed the whole subject with: "I'll go tell Graves to make sure your room's ready, miss, and you go in and say good night to *her*!"

He nodded, amiably as ever, and trudged away to the stairs.

Numbly the pretty Miss Blair gazed after him; passed a hand across her aching eyes and gazed then for a time at the door of Mrs. Stone's quarters. Eventually she shuffled to it, and spent another interval gazing at the placidly sleeping lady, at last

to slump wearily into the chair she had lately deserted, and gaze on, just as numbly.

Mrs. Stone stirred, opened her eyes with a momentary confused scowl, smiled benignly at Cynthia.

"Yes—I'm listening," she said brightly.

"I—I just closed my eyes, my child.

'With a great cry of joy his powerful arms closed about her bare shoulders—' Go on!"

CHAPTER XI.

ATTEMPTS.

"I THINK I've read enough," said Cynthia.

"Want to go to bed?"

"If there's nothing else to do. But—oh, Mrs. Stone," the guest pleaded, "isn't there anything I can say that will make you let me go home?"

"Huh?" demanded the lady, and awoke fully. "I thought that was all settled. What's the matter? Some of your folks taken sick while I was dozing?"

"Er—er—yes!" the guest cried gladly.

"My cousin!"

"What's the matter with her?"

"Well, she—er—she—you see, she has these—well, they're spells, you know, and—"

"Yes, I know all about those spells," the elder lady chuckled. "Honey, you're the worst apology for a liar I ever met—and I've met some wonders."

She wagged her head. She even winked at Cynthia as the chuckle waxed to a gentle, comfortable quaking of her ample frame.

Miss Blair breathed a little harder.

"You know what's going to happen to you eventually, don't you?" she demanded. "When you do decide to release me, and I tell my people, and they—they decide to take legal action?"

There was just a shade of annoyed astonishment in the smile with which Mrs. Stone considered her.

"Why, no, Cynthia; I don't know," she said. "I may be growing dumb in my old age, but to save my life I can't see that anything's going to happen to me. It 'd be

sort of horrible to have to press the matter of that lace pin, but if I'm pushed to it I can do it—any time. And if you ever *should* decide to—to try taking what you call legal action—why, no, Cynthia I can't see what's going—what's going to happen to me at all. What is?"

"Oh!" choked Cynthia Blair.

"You're too shy and you were too long getting here, to take any chances now you are here, even if I do have to use drastic measures," Mrs. Stone rumbled pleasantly; and then scowled in sudden irritation. "Tah! Have done with your skittishness! All I'm trying to do is to make sure you'll get a splendid husband and a few millions! Run along to bed, Cynthia; here's Towner, waiting to show you to your room."

Considerably later, after a prolonged period of sitting and frowning at the hands on her cane, Mrs. Stone journeyed to her daughter's suite, humming contentedly. Cornelia was reading in bed.

"Where's that fussy pink bathrobe of Dora's?" Mrs. Stone demanded.

"Didn't she take it with her?"

"Nope. Took her gray one—I saw it packed."

"Then the pink one's probably in her smaller closet, mother. Why?"

"Dora coming home to-morrow?"

"She didn't say—exactly, that is. I rather expected her to-day."

"And she raises Cain when anybody monkeys with her things, too, doesn't she?" Mrs. Stone reflected cheerily. "However, I guess I'll take a chance with her bathrobe; it 'll tickle the young one!"

"What young one?"

"Cynthia, my dear. She's staying for a day or two."

Mrs. Ronalds dropped her book and opened her eyes.

"Why, mother?"

"Oh, just so that I can see her engagement to Neville ratified with my own eyes and get that blamed boy's future settled!"

"But she's not engaged to him. She said so!"

"She was lying, Corney," chuckled the elder lady. "They've made some fool secret compact and she's sticking to it through thick and thin! But I surprised the truth

out of her. I asked her, all of a sudden, if she really did love him, and her face lit up and she gurgled and gasped and rolled her eyes and admitted it. They're engaged, fast enough. I'll find that bathrobe myself and send Graves up with it."

Mrs. Ronalds's hands clasped almost ecstatically.

"Oh, if that sweet little thing is *really* the girl my boy has selected, I can sleep at last!" she stated.

"Well, she is—and so can I!" Mrs. Stone grunted, and departed.

Had Graves's lips been just a little tighter, there would not have been even a slit across the front of her tart countenance.

"Mrs. Stone sent this for your use, miss," she said, draping the elaborate pink robe over the foot of the four-poster.

"Yes?" Cynthia murmured.

"Will there be something else—Miss Blair?"

"Nothing," Cynthia sighed.

"Breakfast is at nine," Graves added.

"Nine?" escaped Cynthia with some energy. "Can't I have breakfast any earlier than that?"

"Nine is the hour. I wouldn't care to ask cook to make any change in it," Graves replied, forbiddingly.

She looked about the big, pretty room quite intently. There was a jewel casket on the dressing table; Graves shook it, found it empty and gazed meditatively at the rather plain toilet articles, the collection of which in its entirety had cost hardly fifty dollars. Plainly, there was nothing about likely to tempt a criminal of Cynthia's type.

"Good night, miss!" Graves said grimly.

"Oh—good night!" said Cynthia.

After that she was alone—more completely, more awfully alone than ever before in her life. Her eyes grew wild as she, too, looked about the big room; her lips began to quiver. Ten seconds of this and, with a low and dreadful moan, the afflicted Cynthia threw herself across the bed and sobbed wildly—and sobbed and still sobbed.

After a distressing period of this, though, the sobbing subsided; there was a dwindling succession of long, shaky breaths. And

then, with a start, Cynthia sat up, blinking, panting, and at last smiling faintly. That impression of a huge man chasing her with a net in one hand and a cane in the other had been a dream, at least.

Weary nature and the habit of an early bedtime had done something for Cynthia, too. She consulted her little watch and discovered that it was nearly one o'clock. But she was rested and her head was clear. She was hungry, too—maddeningly hungry; but the clear-headedness was almost enough to compensate for that.

Well—she was there for a while; so much was certain. She was there, indeed, until somebody more capable than herself had contrived the way to a safe departure. Somebody, to be sure! Who? Cynthia sighed heavily—and then started up with a small cry. This night she seemed to have a monopoly of all the stupidity in the world; on the little table, not six feet from herself, stood the telephone.

She stifled a gasp which promised to become quite noisy and reached for the instrument. Nora, of course! She'd give the facts to Nora and, if that capable young woman didn't know the answer at least she would know where to race for advice—to the two lawyers with whom they were acquainted, or to Uncle Dan himself! The great consideration was that Nora would leap into action, and that, within hours at most, Cynthia would know just how it feels to be saved.

She giggled hysterically and put her lips close to the transmitter, all ready to whisper the number and rouse Nora Blair. She held her very breath, that she might not lose even the fraction of a second in answering the operator's initial query—held it and sat rigid—and then, perforce, breathed again at last and moved the hook cautiously up and down. So far, nothing but immeasurable silence had come to her from the device.

One impatient line appeared between Cynthia's pretty brows. She tried the hook again—and waited—and once more tried the hook, albeit five good minutes of the same silence had passed. Then, with a small groan, the younger Miss Blair conceded the accuracy of that suspicion which

had been stealing down upon her: whatever the switchboard arrangement below, this particular telephone was not connected with the outside world.

However, the inspiration itself was just as sound as ever.

There were other instruments, all over the place apparently. Her only problem was to locate one of them in a secluded spot and there to do her whispering. There should be no insurmountable difficulty about it: this was an early retiring household and all its members must have been slumbering hours ago.

Which way, then? There was the main door of the room, through which she had entered and there was the door in the corner, through which Graves had left. The latter seemed to offer the more interesting possibilities. Cynthia hurried to it and opened it, and all but exclaimed aloud in her glee, for her guess had been correct; here lay a dusky, narrow passage, giving upon what appeared to be a back stairway and hall, and in the latter a light burned very dimly.

So *there* was the way! Cynthia tiptoed into the passage. She'd have to be extraordinarily cautious in passing the floor below this one; that was where Mrs. Stone slept, but once on the main floor of the home the rest ought to be easy enough. She'd have to prowl around in the dark, too, for switching on lights was far too risky; but with care and persistence another ten minutes ought to find her talking to Nora!

So Cynthia tiptoed on and turned into the servants' hallway and made for the rather narrow staircase—and there Cynthia halted, for a low voice said:

"Just a moment, there! Just a moment, miss!"

The younger Miss Blair clapped one hand over her mouth. Her beautiful eyes dilated. A door was opening beside her; from it Graves was stepping soundlessly. Graves's hair, drawn back tightly, dangled in a thin pigtail; a flannel robe was caught tightly about her spare figure, and her eyes were narrow as her mouth was tight. She came close to Cynthia Blair and laid a heavy hand upon her arm.

"Caught you, hey?" she said without prelude or apology. "Well, those rough ones, like *her*, always have a soft, foolish streak in 'em, young woman, and they'll take in the riffraff when the notion strikes 'em and think it's all right; but *I* was looking for something like this!"

"Why—" Cynthia gasped.

"Because *I* saw through you the very first minute I laid eyes on you," Graves pursued acidly. "Now, save your breath if you're going to explain what you were doing and where you were going. I know all about it! I was sitting up, waiting for it!"

"Take your hand from my arm!" said Miss Blair.

"I'll do that, gladly. And you turn yourself around and go back to the room she gave you, and stay there! You'll do no roaming around this house to-night to see what can be picked up."

"You dare to—"

"Go back to your room!"

"I shall do precisely as I please!" stated the eternally mistaken Cynthia.

"Well, the brass of you!" gasped Graves. "Now, you hear me and if you know what's well for you, remember! I get into no arguments with *her* that I don't have to get into; if she thinks you ought to be cuddled instead of being put in a cell, that's her business. But she's a good mistress in a lot of ways, and I don't mean to let her be looted by the likes of you, just because she's got a trusting streak. You get to your room and stay there and we'll say no more about it, but if I catch you prowling again, I'll screech for help and hang on to you—and let her know what's what!"

"Why, you absurd—" Cynthia began, contemptuously, although it is to be noted that she did not actually push past Graves.

"And if you don't move a bit lively, I'll start my screeching now, and we'll have it over with on the spot!" Graves added. "Half past one in the morning, and you with your baby face sneaking about to see what you can steal from a woman that's trying to be a friend to you! For shame on you! Are you going?"

Now, the curious fact is that Cynthia really *was* going at just that time. She was not greatly shaken or excited; there was

even a suggestion of real amusement in her smile; but she was moving back toward her room, nevertheless. Graves followed to the narrow passage and even a yard or so up the passage. Graves stood there for some little time in hesitation after the door had closed; there was no further sign of Cynthia.

This was because Cynthia, at the moment, was sitting on the edge of her bed, alternately laughing breathlessly and muttering indignantly. Her excursion in search of a phone really had not been a glowing success! Or that particular excursion had not been, at all events—which was no reason at all why the next one should not be crowned with a triumph that she so much desired.

Oh, there was to be a next one, just as soon as she heard Graves retire from her post. Cynthia listened intently. Aha! She was going, even now! Miss Blair's keen ear caught the faintest creaking of a door hinge; it was safe to assume that Graves had resumed her watch from her own quarters.

So, that being all right, and using a great deal more care than she had used in the first instance, the guest of the house made her way to the door of her room, which led to the main corridor, opened it and looked inquiringly up and down the corridor. This, too, was very dimly illuminated. It was also deserted. Cynthia dimpled and moved, without so much as a rustle, toward the head of the stairs—and from a little alcove whose very existence she had not even suspected, Towner bobbed up, so suddenly that his glasses slid from his nose.

He caught them with a deft clap at his chest. He blinked a lingering drowsiness from his eyes. He shook his head as he replaced the glasses and said very softly, and, it must be acknowledged, very sorrowfully:

"Oh, tut, tut! The very thing I feared, eh?"

"Towner, please don't—"

"I couldn't believe it, thinking of you, miss—and then again I had a feeling in my bones you was going to try it out!" the butler said, very earnestly, indeed. "I did

and that's why I waited—to save you from yourself, miss!"

"To—do what?"

"Honey, I'm plenty old enough to be your father; I want you to listen to me a minute," said Towner, and his kindly eyes suffused with moisture. "I could just as well hold you and send for the madam and tell her what's afoot, you know. Well, I ain't going to do that, no matter if I should. Miss, you're just a little girl—you ain't any more than a child. And there's good in you aplenty, too—there's a heap more good than you yourself ever suspect. Probably there's hundreds more like you, and every one just as heartbreaking. It's what I've said time and again, these last years—too much liberty and not enough honest training; and in your case, somehow, you've got in with real bad associates, of course. But I'm telling you, for I speak from some experience, that it ain't too late!"

"Too late for what?" Cynthia asked, rather dazedly.

"To face about and go straight!" said the good soul, and his voice broke. "Honey, I'm begging you as I'd beg my own child, if I had one, just to reform."

"Well, as—as it chances, I don't need to reform, Towner," Cynthia replied, not very steadily. "I—"

"But you do. You do! There's nothing to this sort of life. There's only one end to it and—psst!"

"What?"

"She's stirring! The madam's stirring!" Towner gasped. "I heard her cane that time. Get back, quick, and stay there, and I'll swear I ain't seen you!"

He even turned her about and gave her a little push; and with the oddest speed Cynthia regained her room. Somehow, she did not crave an interview with Mrs. Stone just then and under just those circumstances that then prevailed.

Cynthia, in fact, fairly scurried to her room and to her perch on the edge of the bed. There she sat for two or three long minutes, listening, breathing rapidly, winking rapidly, yet at the same time endeavoring to look precisely like a young woman who has just been roused from sound sleep and is wondering what it is all about.

This, surely enough, was a cowardly thing to do, as Cynthia realized presently. She stiffened up indignantly—and immediately relaxed again, casting a wary eye toward the door, yawning and assuming the posture of one about to remove a shoe.

The muffled tread, however, was not coming from just that direction. Ah, yes, it was the door from the passage that opened now to admit Graves, who entered with a bright red spot on either cheek and a considerable gleam in her eye.

"She—she thought she heard you moving about; she's just below here; and she rang for me," the maid reported, not without difficulty. "She said that maybe I hadn't made you comfortable!"

"Well," Cynthia said drearily.

"Well, if I hadn't, I will now!" Graves replied quite dangerously. "She told me to be sure that you were tucked up snug before I left you this time! Get into that bed."

"I—"

"You'll get in there, miss, or I'll tell her the whole truth about how you were prowling around—and once you do let her see just what you are, she'll get mad enough to surprise you!" snarled the maid, and one saw that she was really a more determined woman than might have been suspected. "I'm not going to stay up all night for the likes of you! Get into that bed!"

Shall it be admitted that Cynthia Blair, despite all the rights and privileges that were naturally hers, obeyed? It may just as well be admitted, for this is precisely the program Cynthia followed, while Graves, hands on hips and thin nostrils dilated,

waited and, doubtless, thought her own thoughts.

Jerkily, then, she picked up Cynthia's little garments, smoothing them with a savage, mechanical touch and then, after considering them blackly for several seconds, laid them over her arm and—

"Here! Where are you going with my clothes?" Cynthia demanded and sat up in bed.

The maid turned and smiled slightly, but quite humanly. Most of her rage had departed.

"I'm merely going to hang them on the forms, miss," she said, courteously enough. "You don't object to that? They'll get all wrinkled if they're left lying about."

"I—no, of course not," Cynthia sighed.

She sank back again.

The maid moved on, without haste, in the general direction of the forms, which were visible through the partly open door of the closet. But at a certain point just midway between this door and the one by which she had arrived, Graves turned and favored Miss Blair with one lightning glance.

An instant, she seemed to poise on tip-toes; then she leaped, with much the effect of a leopard bounding down upon its prey. The leap deposited her in the very passage itself, too, clothes and all; and now she whisked about and peered at Cynthia, through the swiftly closing portal, her thin features ablaze with malevolent triumph!

"There!" hissed Graves. "Now we'll see how far you get with the silverware while honest folks are sleeping, you little hussy!"

And the latch clicked and, at once, the key turned on the far side!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

U U U

APPLE BLOSSOMS IN NEW YORK

THE bashful buds upon the tree
Shrink and look down,
They're really half ashamed to be
Seen here in town.
They know that they are out of place—
I see a blush on each one's face!

Jean Strong.



The Wedding Gift

By JOHN D. SWAIN

LITTLE JEM had done his part faithfully and well. He was one of the cleverest cat-kids unjailed, and "Thumb" Carlin himself had picked him up to get the necessary dope about the town of Bingham and its First—and last—National Bank.

Easing himself gently into a burg large enough to be prosperous yet small enough to take notice of strangers, Jem had got a job at the garage as an expert gas-engine and general repair man, and had made himself useful and inconspicuous, as a good gay cat should.

His work had justified the confidence the yegg leader reposed in him. He learned the habits of the bank personnel from its president down to the porter. He knew that the Bingham police force was divided into two platoons; the chief, who was on duty days, and his assistant who took the night trick, and whose unbreakable custom it was to drop into Hedstrom's lunch cart at exactly midnight for beans, pie and coffee, the repast just taking half an hour.

He had been inside the bank several times on errands for the garage man, and had drawn a fairly accurate plan of the layout, together with a description of the safe, and the type of locks used on the bank's two doors, front and back. He had listed the buildings in its immediate vicinity, with notations as to their occupants, and had added several picture postcards of the square on which the First National stood.

Upon receipt of a postal from Thumb Carlin with the words: *All well and hope you are the same*, Little Jem had complained of chills, had developed a realistic cough, and when he seemed to grow worse rather than better had thrown up his job and departed, to the sincere regret of the garage man.

At about the same time Jem passed out of the life of Bingham forever, a group of a dozen men were receiving final instructions in Thumb Carlin's boudoir in an obscure lodging house in Boston's south end. The room was on the second floor back, and there was at the time no occupant in any

of the other three rooms on that landing. In a little less than half an hour there would be none at all; for Thumb's grip was packed, his room was paid for in advance according to Shawmut Avenue tradition, and there was nothing to detain him longer in the Hub.

In short, the little army was all set to move upon Bingham, and to remove from its nice brick bank the cash on hand, the contents of its safe deposit boxes, and what they had.

It was not proposed to move with a fanfare, nor with banners waving. The parade was to take as little time as possible passing any given points, and to proceed through the less populated and more scenic routes to its rendezvous. But as even hick constables, not to mention the State police, could hardly fail to take notice of the passage of twelve such hardbitten characters for more than one of whom a rich reward was awaiting the claimant, they followed the usual procedure of yeggs by breaking up into small groups of not over two or three, and planning to meet two nights hence at an abandoned barn some two miles this side of Bingham, a haven discovered and fully mapped by the industrious gay cat, Little Jem.

"No booze, no skirts, no noise," warned Thumb, who knew as well as any poet what limitless possibilities lurk in this combination. "After we crack this box and make our getaway, ya can raise all the hell ya wanta. Carnegie'll have nothin' on youse!"

Which was a manner of speaking. Thumb Carlin intended no slur on the donor of libraries as a cut-up in his leisure moments.

Thumb waited until, by ones and twos, and at decent intervals his trusty fellows had stolen down the stairs and out into Shawmut Avenue. Then, with a final glance to see that nothing that could possibly connect him as a former tenant had been overlooked in waste basket, bureau drawer, or closet corner, he nodded to Mr. Hambone Slade, whom he had chosen to companion him.

Hambone thereupon picked up the fitted traveling bag of his leader—his own effects being stuffed into his pockets—and they checked out of the lodging house by the

simple process of tossing the iron door key onto the hall table that stood at the foot of the stairs. A word as to the contents of Thumb Carlin's bag. There was a double fistful of capable looking keys, a spider with which to work safety locks, some thin strips of celluloid bent at right angles at one end, two well oiled gats, a sectional steel jimmy as beautifully made as a dental tool, a large thermos bottle containing the "soup" used in persuading reluctant strong-boxes, two pairs of cotton gloves and several black silk handkerchiefs.

There were also a clean shirt and socks, a comb with quite a number of its teeth remaining, and a worn toothbrush. For all his deplorable lack of civic consciousness, Mr. Carlin was neat in his personal habits, if not actually fastidious.

II.

WHEN the combination baggage and smoker staggered into Moosuc, the combination conductor and trainman announced huskily: "All out! Fur's the train goes."

Three passengers thereupon alighted. One of them lived in Moosuc, and so had intended to get out here. The other two were Thumb Carlin and Hambone Slade, who had planned to go to the end of the one-track line, which was Pittsfield.

"How come?" Thumb asked the one-man train crew, as his eyes vainly sought to pierce the black night which a single lantern did little to dispel.

"Steam-box gotta be packed. Old Number Twenty-one is plumb worn out, anyhow! But we'll leave to-morrow at seven A. M."

"S'pos'n' ya don't get her fixed?" objected Hambone.

"Make no difference. The other train gits in from Pittsfield at seven, and she'll haul us out."

"What sort of a place is this burg? Any hotel here?"

"Rotten," the trainman grunted. "There's an old tavern straight up the road to your right 'bout a quarter of a mile. Ed Mosely runs it. He'll put you up."

The two set forth not uncheerfully. It

has been explained that it was their wish to travel as unostentatiously as possible, and they would be safer here than in Pittsfield. And as their train had broken down, their presence would rouse no suspicions. Accident had supplied a perfect alibi.

To the left, a small cluster of lights indicated the center of Moosuc; but along the rough road they traveled there was only a fugitive moon to guide them. Now it sailed behind a cloud, and they almost had to feel their way along. Then it would emerge, and for a mile on either hand they could see sleek pastures, and black groves, and in the distance a crooked wall of white mist where a river ran.

From time to time Hambone set the leather suit case onto the road and stopped to rest. He set it down carelessly, and there was in the thermos bottle enough nitroglycerin to remove Moosuc from the county and leave in its place a large, coarse hole; but like all yeggs, Hambone handled high explosive with the contempt of familiarity. Frogs sang in the damp meadow to their right; in the distance an owl hooted dismally. Once a pretty black and white animal trotted unconcernedly across the road directly ahead.

"Kitty, kitty!" Thumb wheedled; but the little creature did not pause to ruin this story.

A sudden turn in the road, and a lighted window in the lower story of a gaunt, rambling structure whose architecture was not easily discernible in the dusk.

"That must be it," Thumb said.

It was. And as they drew nearer, the moon swam into clear sky, and their wondering eyes made out, behind the building, a vast circle of low palings embracing a sloping, weed-grown track, above which loomed the lofty ruin of a judges' stand. Presently, they could identify an arched gateway with a ticket window at one side. At the same time, a swinging signboard, bracketed to the corner of the house became legible. It read in faded lettering:

MOSELY'S HOTEL

Ed Mosely, the third of the name, met them at the front door. He was a huge man, with rounded shoulders, and a ruddy

face with bushy white hair and mustache; a man in his sixties, vigorous, and with the network of shrewd and whimsical lines about eyes and lips which seems a part of all those who have had to do with racing horses. He was in his shirt-sleeves, for the night was warm; but he wore a blue woolen undershirt rolled halfway up his thick, hairy arms. He nodded, and removed the corn-cob from his mouth.

"Evenin', gents. Heard old Number Twenty-one give out. Want to get put up for the night, I s'pose?"

"Yer a quick thinker, feller," Thumb admitted. "And we also wanta be baited. Ain't that what ya used to call it when there wasn't so much grass in yer track?"

Mosely laughed rumblingly.

"I've baited some good flesh in my time; me and my old man and grandsire before me. Man *and* beast. And I guess we can take the edge off of your appetite, even now. Come in!"

He led the way into the office, a low-ceilinged room, at one end of which ran a long, battered walnut bar which now served as desk, and was littered with books and papers. Here had been the tap room. A certain upright next the window was pitted with thousands of little holes made by the awl used to pry off the wired corks of bottled beer. Though it was midsummer, a couple of birch logs smoldered in the fireplace which had heated many a poker in the days of hot flip.

Mosely's had been a famous sporting resort in its time. It had witnessed notable meets, high gaming, deep drinking, not a few rough-and-tumble fights. Nights when every room was crowded, and men slept on the hay in the barn, or rolled up in blankets on the wide piazza. But all this had passed. Ed Mosely didn't average a guest a day now; he had steadfastly refused to turn the old tavern into an automobile roadhouse, and he neither drank nor sold any rum. He kept the old place open for business because he hated to take down the sign that had swung for over a century; and he knew no other home.

Hambone handed the bag over to him, and followed it up a short, broad flight of worn stairs, and down a hall that looked

as long as the race track, and into a room large enough for the supreme court to sit. There were a field bed and half a dozen chairs, two tables and a washstand, an enormous black walnut wardrobe.

Mosely tested the old mulberry pitcher, saw that it was filled, and that there was a cake of yellow soap and plenty of towels.

"I'll get supper started," he said. "Come down when you're a mind to."

While Thumb washed up, Hambone sadly studied the wall paper, a quaint design of faded rose wreaths twining about broken columns, set in panels.

"The bridal chamber, Thumb! And 'stead of a blushin' bride, I draws *you*!"

"I hope we draws some good grub, an' plenty of it," sputtered Thumb from a froth of yellow suds.

Downstairs again, they registered in Mosely's ancient ledger, breaking the True Name Law of Massachusetts in doing so.

Their host watched them with idle curiosity.

"You're in good company, gents! The records go back to 1820. Dan'l Webster's thar, three times. Pop Geers a dozen times. Not to mention two presidents and a few millionaire sports."

He retrieved the rusty pen and jabbed it back into a large Early Rose potato.

"Supper's ready. You'll have to make out with what we got. If you'd dropped in about twenty year earlier, I could of given you a brace of fat pa'tridges stuffed with chestnuts, some Medford rum, and an old peach brandy that'd knock your eye out! But I don't pertend to run a hotel no more."

The dining room into which they were led was breath-taking in its immensity. Extending the length of the house, it must have seated a hundred in its day. The one table remaining stood in the very middle, an oasis in a desert. Overhead hung an oil lamp by a chain. Mosely drew out a couple of pine chairs.

"The room overhead is the same size. Old ballroom. Got a fiddler's throne up in the wall at one end, and a spring floor. The young bucks and their gals used to shake it down till cockcrow, when I was a lad!"

The two yeggs appraised the layout of the long table. Its clean but patched white cloth bore a huge cruet containing vinegar, pepper, salt, mustard, and horseradish. Flanking it was a glass jar of pickles, a slab of butter that must have weighed a pound, a loaf of home made bread on a wooden platter. Their napkins were rolled in ivory rings, yellow with age and handling. A silver ice-water pitcher which tipped on a swivel stood within reach. A green glass shaped like a top hat was full of toothpicks. There was a large bowl of preserved currants, a plate of cottage cheese, and a yellow, blue-banded bowl containing a couple dozen sugared crul-
lers.

Thus far they had got in their inventory when a third guest entered and seated himself across from them with a pleasant word flung to Mosely. He was a small, mild-mannered man of middle age, with a sparse beard. He wore no coat, seemed surprised that there was company for supper, and looked a trifle embarrassed.

Thumb trod furtively upon Hambone's foot. The stranger's vest was unbuttoned, and the peterman's eye focused upon the "gallusses" which were visible as he settled down in his chair.

Upon the left one was pinned a five-pointed metal star!

III.

"MEET Mr. Joe Grant, gents. Our constable, pound-keeper, overseer o' the poor, and tax collector."

The three nodded, and Grant laughed shyly.

"I ain't so busy, at that," he explained. "No strays in the pound for more'n a year, nobody on the town but one old codger we board out, and sence the tramps stopped coming, nobody to arrest."

"That leaves the tax collecting, once a year," Thumb laughed. "Don't time hang kinda heavy?"

Mosely spoke up good-naturedly.

"Oh, Joe's consid'able of a tinker. Fixes clocks and donkey engines and sets saws and such like. Always enough to keep him out of mischief."

The banter was interrupted by the entrance of a young woman bearing a great platter of ham and eggs and boiled potatoes, which she offered in turn to each, beginning with Joe Grant.

Thumb and Hambone watched her with arrogantly appraising eyes. She was a girl of perhaps twenty-eight, not exactly pretty but with a fresh wholesomeness that was arresting. She had brown hair, not bobbed but rolled back in a thick wave from a fine brow, beneath which friendly brown eyes shone brightly. She was fairly tall, strongly built, and on face and hands was a warm tone partly the result of wind and sun, but owing something to hot ovens. It seemed as if a faint fragrance of fresh baked bread stole from her clean white apron-dress.

"Two eggs for me, Ella," Grant said. "I'm hungry as a bear."

"I'll fry more if that's not enough," she smiled. "The hens are laying fine now."

"Tell 'em to lay a couple more for me, then," Thumb said as he helped himself. "How 'bout it, kid?"

Ella's friendly smile stiffened a little on her lips. For the first time she looked closely at the two strangers, and a vague unease seemed to gather deep in her eyes.

"I've got plenty in the kitchen," she said. "Mr. Mosely never lets anybody get up hungry from table."

"Well, him and me won't fight over that!"

For a few moments the three men ate if not exactly in silence, at least without words. Mosely had gone back to the office, and Ella to her kitchen for coffee and to fry more eggs.

At last Thumb sighed contentedly, pushed back his plate.

"Pretty good armful, that skirt," he said to Grant. "Made bedroom eyes at ya, too!"

Grant looked up, startled, his mouth open for the forkful of ham which was arrested in its quarter circle.

"Huh? Oh, you mean she's sturdy like. And Ella's a mighty good girl, too."

"They all are," Thumb drawled.

"Bless 'em! Well—I'm for a smoke."

His chair screeched as he shoved back

on the wide planking, and Hambone followed him out to the office. A few minutes later Joe Grant joined them. He had lingered for a few words with Ella while she was clearing off the table. Sometimes he helped her after supper, wiping the dishes as she washed them.

The girl was Mosely's niece, and the only one employed about the great, echoing tavern; nor was she overworked. Mosely did his full share, and as has been said, guests were few these days. Often there were none present for supper; and Ella would sit at table with Ed and Joe in a room where many and many a time more than a hundred had dined; and Mosely would spin yarns of the old days until their ears could almost hear the starter's pistol, the drumming of hoofs, the roar of the crowd drifting in through the open kitchen door from the track just beyond.

Then, as Mosely's voice stopped, silence would unfold them once more, the fog from the river would smother the field and blot out the palings and surge up against the ruinous judges' stand, and far away a loon would burst into horrible laughter, ending in a sob.

To-night, while the rest were finishing their supper, Mosely had descended to his cellar, large as the crypt of a cathedral, and, having threaded his way among sundry casks, had from the last one filled a pot-bellied yellow pitcher which he bore carefully upstairs.

"I don't keep a drop of liquor on the place," he explained, as Thumb Carlin entered the office. "And I don't sell this cider; just make a little for myself and friends. You never tasted better."

It was so. Amber-colored, a full year old; and pressed from sound Baldwin and russet apples, it had been allowed to freeze from time to time during the first winter, and the ice skimmed from its surface. The warm room was full of the aroma of apples.

It was still, of course; fermentation done with months ago. It was wholesomely acrid, neither bitter nor sour; and the tumbler each man held was the inspirational co-efficient of four fingers of well aged whisky. Thumb, unused to cider, downed half of

his glass with a grunted, "Here's to crime!" only to blink with astonishment at the violent kick he got from it.

He cast a wary eye upon Hambone, noted that he was sipping his relishingly. Thumb never drank when on a business trip; it was Hambone's laxity in this respect that had led Thumb to choose him for his companion. He wanted to keep an eye on him. And he was instantly warned by reliable inside information that, surprising as it might be, a real he-man's drink had been evolved from the blameless fruit of the orchards.

He resolved to drink very little of it, and to see that Hambone did the same. As the petorman of the yegg band which was converging upon Bingham, great responsibility rested on Thumb. Without his presence the party would be a total loss.

As they raised their glasses, the door leading to the hall across from the dining room half opened, and Ella's smiling face was framed in it. She nodded in a friendly manner, including them all in her slow regard.

"Good night, folks," she said in her rich contralto. "I've got to be up early tomorrow. Going to churn, you know, Ed. Think I'll turn in."

Hambone grinned, showing blackened teeth. He waved his half empty tumbler genially in her direction.

"Hop to it, baby! What's the number o' yer room?"

A dead silence fell, in which the ticking of the old Willard clock on the office wall sounded austere and accusing. The girl's face went scarlet, then white; and as it merged into the blackness of the hall as she backed away, Mosely half rose in his chair, his eyes cold and his mouth opening to speak.

But Joe Grant beat him to it. He spoke mildly, though, almost shyly.

"You hadn't ought to say a thing like that," he remonstrated.

Hambone swung sidewise, his leering grin changing to a snarl.

"Who says so? An' why not?"

"For one thing, I aim to marry Ella," Grant said, still speaking softly.

"Why, ya old cradle-snatcher!" Thumb

laughed boisterously. "Mean to tell me ya ain't married, at your age?"

"I'm a widow man. Going on eight years now. And my boy's gone to the city to work, so I'm all alone. 'Sides, I'm only forty," he added defensively.

"Well, here's power to ya," Thumb toasted. "I'll send ya a nice weddin' present when it comes off! What say we have a little game of poker? Just friendly like."

Mosely swallowed back his distaste.

"I been in the hotel business quite a spell, boys, and one thing I learned is never to set into a game with strangers. Neither me nor Joe has anything but chickenfeed, anyhow. If penny ante is worth your time, we might kill an hour or so that way. What say?"

"Sure," agreed Thumb. "We got no money belts stropped round us, either; and we always lose at cards. Bring on the pasteboards, and good-by two bits!"

Mosely went behind his bar and raised the lid of an ancient pine desk.

"Haven't even got a new deck," he apologized. "Fur's I'm concerned, I'd as lief play for matches. Don't seem right to bet real money on cards that's been pawed over a dozen times."

"Ferget it," Thumb laughed.

So they cut, and the deal fell to him.

He dealt with a deft certainty that was all the more noticeable because the thumb of his right hand was missing, a souvenir of his novitiate in ladling "soup." It was this which had earned him his moniker—Thumb Carlin. Long practice coupled with natural dexterity enabled him to do everything with his four fingers that the average man can with five; besides a number of things that not so many men can do at all.

Joe Grant watched him with interest. From time to time he raised his eyes to the impassive face of the dealer, and the ghost of a frown gathered on Joe's forehead. His interest in the game suffered, and at the end of an hour of slow play he had dropped sixty cents.

The dull game, or the hard cider, had made them all drowsy. It was Hambone, a hound for poker, who shoved back his chair with an oath and declared that he could feel his brain softening and his arteries

hardening. He lighted a cigarette and hunched deep in his chair and hooked his hands behind his pineapple-shaped head.

Grant rose.

"Ed, that ham of yours was tarnation salt. I'm going out and get me a nice, long drink from that icewater pitcher you got on the dining room table. It's a wonder you wouldn't keep some here in the office! You fellers want I should fetch you some?"

No one but Grant was thirsty, it seemed; and after a time he rejoined them, wiping his lips and clearing his throat as he settled into his chair.

He looked squarely at Mosely, and when he had caught and held his eyes, his own left orb flickered slightly. Mosely looked surprised and expectant.

"'Member that counterfeiter stopped here 'long 'bout eight, nine year ago?"

"Yeah," grunted Mosely. "What about him?"

"Nothing, only us playing cards tonight put me in mind of him. You won a couple of dollars, Ed, and he give you one of his phony bank notes. And you passed it on in good faith. Wonder who finally got stuck?"

"Who was he?" Thumb asked.

"Why, feller name of Jennings. One of the mob used to put the stuff into circulation; and he had the plates. The man who made the queer was Parson Randall."

"Him?" Hambone spoke up. "He was the best in the business. Died down in Atlanta 'bout two years ago."

Grant nodded.

"So I heard tell. Well, seems the government wanted the plates the worst way, and had sent out descriptions of Jennings, and I recognized him minute I clapped eyes on him. I was scared, I tell you; never was one for gun play, and had Jennings figgered out as a desp'rate character. But shucks! He just collapsed. No fight in him. Me and Ed carried him up to his room and put him to bed with a nice hot drink. Ed had a license, them days."

Mosely laughed, and nodded his head.

"That's so," he said.

"And when the Federal agents got here,

they took him and his plates and about three thousand dollars' worth of trick money. There was a reward offered for the plates, a thousand dollars. But them detectives took it. Give me a hundred for my trouble. All I got out of it."

Thumb nodded vigorously and spat.

"Just like a dick! Dirty, yeller crooks, all of 'em!"

Grant smoked in silence for a few minutes, eyes half closed.

"There's a funny side to that affair," he resumed. "Them five dollar notes was about the slickest counterfeits ever put out in the East. Banks took 'em without question; I've heard there was only three men at the Sub-Treasury in New York could tell 'em from the genuine. Well, after they had took Jennings away, me and Ed here got to thinking it was sort of funny all he had on him was three thousand or so; and we decided there must be a lot more planted somewhere. And one thing leading to another, we figgered mebber he'd hid some of it right in the room he'd stopped in here. So we went through it like a pair of vacuum cleaners. And sure enough, while Jennings had been pretendin' to be sick abed he'd took his penknife and slit a little place in the seam of the feather mattress, and when we ripped it open there was more'n a hundred thousand dollars' worth! 'Member, Ed?"

"Think I'm likely to forget it? Never see so much in one pile, before nor since."

Thumb's pupils distended as he leaned toward Joe Grant.

"Ya turned it over to the gov'ment?"

Grant shuffled his feet awkwardly.

"Well, that's what I ought to have done, I know. But I was kinda hot over being done out of the reward, and I just kept it. After I cooled down I dassent turn it in; they'd question me, likely, and find out I'd held onto it for 'most a year. And so I cal'lated to burn it up; I dunno why I never did."

"Ya mean to tell me ya got more'n a hundred grand of queer money on ya?" breathed Thumb, as if he were choking.

Grant laughed uneasily.

"Not on me, no. It's in an old shoe box down to my house."

"And you don't—ya never—"

"What you mean is, was I ever tempted to utter it—as the law calls it. Between us all here—Ed knows, I've told him the story—and just to see if it really was as good an imitation as it looked to be, I took one five into one of the biggest New York banks and asked the teller to change it into quarters. He just give it a careless look, and took it without a whimper. Then I give the quarters away in charity, dropped 'em into beggars' hats and poor boxes and so on, so's not to make a crook out of myself."

"Joe never gave me a chance to pass any of 'em," complained Mosely.

A flicker passed between the averted eyes of Thumb and Hambone. The peterman breathed what might have been a prayer, but wasn't.

"I read a lot about this Randall's work," he said. "Never believed it was good enough to fool *me*. The paper, now; them little red and blue silk threads—"

"They never did learn where he got that. Anyhow, it was just the same as the Treasury uses. It 'd fool you, all right. It's fooled gov'ment experts."

"Just the same, I don't believe it! Can't ya let me see a sample of it? Just one—"

Grant knocked the ash from his pipe into a cuspidor.

"You can see it all," he agreed. "I live only a hop and a jump from here, and the moon's out. A little walk will settle our supper."

The two yeggs rose as if operated by springs; Mosely, watching Joe's eyes, announced that he'd seen the stuff a score of times, and would read the papers till they got back.

The three put on their hats and set forth up the road, each busy with his thoughts. To Thumb, the incredible news that a hundred thousand of the best green goods ever produced had been lying loose in an old shoe box for years almost made him forget the Bingham job. The Federal people must have forgotten all about it; had destroyed the plates, and thought they had rounded up all the product that had been put into circulation. And here in a little hick bush

named Moosuc—a water tank and a weed-grown race track—

His reverie was broken in upon. Grant had halted before a pretty little brick cottage covered with ivy, upon which fell the benison of moonlight.

"Here's my bachelor hangout," he announced, pressing close to the door which was in shadow, and thrusting a key into the lock. He struck a match.

"Pretty dark inside here, boys; foller me close."

Cupping the lighted match in his hands, he passed through the dark doorway, the two at his heels. An instant later, and with a clang grotesquely out of place in a cottage door, it slammed shut, and the harsh rasp of the lock sounded a note of doom to the two left groping in darkness within.

Shouts and curses came through a heavily barred window to the high constable of Moosuc, listening outside.

"Ya tainted son of a flea-bitten—" The words burbled away as if cut off by a minatory hand, and Thumb's more conciliatory whine replaced them.

"Aw, what's the big idea? Ya got nothin' on us—not a thing! Ain't it hard luck enough to get dropped offa the train at a dump we never even heard of—"

"Listen, men!" interrupted Grant. "I've no charge against you, as you say. But you sort of riled me up, saying what you did to Ella to-night. I'll turn you loose tomorrow morning; and it 'll be a lesson to you to keep civil tongues in your heads next time!"

"Ya old goat!" yelled Hambone. "Don't ya know we can have the law on ya for false arrest—and imprisonment?"

"Wouldn't wonder if that's so, boys. Well, I'm easy to find! They all know me round here."

"But, listen, feller!" Thumb took up the anthem. "We gotta make Pittsfield on that morning train! And she leaves at seven—"

"Don't worry. I'll see you get there. And there's two good bunks inside, with clean blankets. Now I'll go get ye something to eat. Law says I must provide victuals and drink."

He departed amid a chorus of obscene protests.

It was only a few rods to his modest story-and-a-half frame house. Lighting an oil lamp when inside, he went to the pantry, found a jar of dried beef, some bread and butter, salt pickles. Taking them to the kitchen table, he prepared a dozen generous sandwiches. Upon the beef he sprinkled salt, and added prepared mustard.

Wrapping the whole in clean brown paper, he blew out the lamp, closed without locking the front door, and was back at the neat little brick lock-up within ten minutes of the time he had left it.

Cautiously edging up to the single barred window—it occurred to him that the men might have guns on them—he called out, and shoved his parcel in through the grating.

To their renewed threats and pleas he paid not the slightest attention; but with a cheery good night he strode, whistling down the road to the tavern.

"Where's the others?" Ed Mosely asked as he came in. "And what the Sam Hill did that crazy yarn you told us mean, anyway?"

Joe Grant did not at once reply. He seated himself, reached for the yellow pitcher and poured himself a half glass of cider.

"Them? Why, I left 'em in the lock-up, Ed."

"In the—what for? You—"

"It's like this, Ed. Minute I see that feller that was shy a thumb, he looked sort of familiarlike. I couldn't place him, and it fretted me some. It wan't till we began to play cards and I watched him deal so sort of nimble, that it come over me who he was. 'Member the robbery of the Northampton Bank, two year ago come October?"

"Sure, I do! Made stir enough, at the time."

"Well—they sent out circulars, you know. I got a sheaf of 'em. And one of 'em was this Thumb feller, sure's you're born! With a thousand dollars' reward, dead or alive. But me, I'm peaceablelike. So I'm keepin' him alive."

"But—but are you *sure*, Joe? They looked hard-boiled enough, but a mistake would be kinda serious."

"Yeah," agreed Grant. "That's how I reasoned it out. So, when I went out to get that drink of water—you 'member, Ed—I slipped upstairs quiet as I could, and into their room. They only had one suit case with 'em, and it was locked. But you know I'm kind of handy with locks and things. I'd seen a light down the hall from under Ella's door; so I knew she was still awake. I sneaked down and scratched on the door, and whispered through the keyhole, and she opened the door a crack and give me a hairpin and a buttonhook. And I soon had the contraption open. What I see inside left me in no doubt but them fellers needed lockin' up. I put everything back in, after taking out the ca'tridges from two automatics. But wait; I'll go get it and show you. While I'm upstairs, get Pittsfield for me on your phone, Ed. Ask for police headquarters."

In a couple of minutes the contents of the suit case were spread before the astounded Mosely, upon the same table they had been playing poker on a half hour before.

Joe Grant explained the use of the little celluloid strips, called attention to the sectional jimmy.

"Vanadium steel; you could pry open a roundhouse with it, and it don't weigh a pound!"

Mosely took out the thermos bottle, shook it, laid it down endwise, and it began to roll gently down the sloping surface of the old table, unnoticed by either.

"Moonshine, most likely," Ed hazarded.

"I guess likely. We'll turn everything over to the police."

The bottle rolled over again, hesitated at the edge of the table, tetered there, and Joe absent-mindedly reached out and picked it up, dropping it carelessly into the suit case among the metallic objects packed away there.

"Might break, if it dropped," he said simply.

There it lay inert, a superexplosive capable of cracking the Great Pyramid like a paper shell pecan!

"Ain't you afraid they'll break out?"

Grant shook his head.

"Not in one night, without tools. The keyhole don't go through the door, you know; and I reset the bars in the window only last spring. The old ones had rusted some."

The telephone bell jingled just then; and Joe answered it.

"This the chief? Mr. Rogers? Joe Grant speaking, from Moosuc. Yeah. Constable. Well, I got that Thumb feller wanted for the Northampton Bank break a couple years ago. Him and a friend. Huh? I dunno who he is. Yeah—their suit case is full of skeleton keys and guns and things—what? In about an hour? All right. G'-by."

"The chief's coming himself, Ed. Going to bring four armed detectives. Says Thumb Carlin—that's his name—is a killer, and won't be took alive if he can help it. Shucks! I reckon he'll go peaceable. Didn't make no fuss about going to the lock-up!"

He chuckled, and Mosely's booming laughter joined in.

Smoking, talking fitfully, going often to the door to peer up the road, the next hour crawled slowly by.

There came the purr of a great eight-cylinder car, the outleaping of a huge man wearing a gold shield and much gold braid, and of four slender, wiry companions in soft clothes and carrying regulation police thirty-eights.

The chief shook hands with Joe, nodded to Mosely.

"Where are they?"

"Locked up. Safe enough. Here's their stuff."

"That's probably nitroglycerin," Rogers observed as he handled the thermos bottle gingerly. "Guess I better let our explosives expert report on that."

Mosely's eyes ballooned.

"Holy mackerel! And we 'most let the damned thing roll off onto the floor!"

"Well, if you had we'd have heard the noise in Pittsfield," said Rogers grimly.

The little party, including Mosely, tramped down the road to the pretty lockup. And as they drew near, strange sounds

came from within its snug walls. A heart-breaking tenor was rendering:

"There stood my poor old father,
Weeping at the bar;
There was my poor old mother,
Tearing down her hair.
Tearing at her old gray locks
While the tears were streaming down;
'My son, my son, what have you done
To be sent to Charleys-town?'"

The ballad was punctuated by a series of whoops from Hambone Slade, worthy of a football classic.

"Sure you haven't pinched a gang of freshmen by mistake?" asked Rogers.

Joe Grant shook his head and grinned sheepishly as shrieks of laughter almost caused the thick growth of ivy to tremble in the moonlight.

"Shucks!" he muttered. "If that wan't jest like my forgetfulness! There was a five-gallon-jug of hard cider Ed here gave me, and as I got no cellar under my house, I kept it in the lockup to ripen. And I never thought to take it out when I put these fellers in. I handed the boys a little snack for supper—some smoked beef and salt pickles and things, to pacify 'em, and likely they must of got thirsty. There's no water in there, and so—"

"And so these birds are ossified with outlaw cider," finished Chief Rogers.

"They'll likely be peevish by morning," mused Joe. "A cider jag is an awful mean one. But just now you'll find 'em friendly-like."

And so it was. When the door was opened after the two yeggs had been warned that four unerring guns were trained upon them, they staggered forth doing a burlesque lockstep, and expressing abounding good will toward all living creatures.

They made no protest over being ironed, but begged tearfully that the visitors would join them in song. And as they rolled away in the big police car, Thumb Carlin leaned out and called back to Grant: "Joe, ya old cradle snatcher, I told ya I'd give ya a wedding gift! They's a big reward out for me. But don't let the crooked dicks trim ya out of it—and give my love to Ella!"



Soft Money

By FRED MACISAAC

Author of "The Four Goliaths," "Nothing But Money," etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

GERTRUDE ASKS AN ARMISTICE.

ROD MCGARRY should have felt exceedingly indignant that the young woman, who had made a hell of his sea voyage up to date, should have the boldness to seat herself beside him and address him. But instead he felt a thrill of rapture which ran all the way down to his toes.

"Pardon, did you—er, say something to me?"

"Mr. McGarry, am I so very awful?"

He gazed at her. Viewed from a distance of eighteen or twenty inches she was an even more exquisite sight than when looked at from across the dining room. Her gorgeous eyes, her lovely hair, her sweet curving lips, her round little chin, her perfect nose—oh, she was too adorable for words! But he had to preserve his attitude.

"You are a very attractive young woman, if that's what you mean."

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she said a little stormily; the meek and humble rôle didn't fit Gertrude Thomas very well. "Hasn't Mr. Campbell explained to you that I never had anything to do with your—your—you know?"

"Yes. So did the captain. I am perfectly willing to believe it."

"And I told you so in my letter."

"You wrote me a letter?"

"Yes. You might have been courteous enough to reply."

"I never received a letter from you, Miss Thomas."

Her eyes widened. "That's very curious. The instant I heard what the captain had done I wrote you expressing regrets for the whole misunderstanding. And I insisted upon his rectifying his mistake at once."

Rod looked puzzled. "No letter was delivered to me."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 11.

She smiled, and the radiance of it affected Rod just as it had struck Howard. "Then I apologize to you for what I thought of you for not answering. The letter must have been intercepted, and I suspect who did it. But I'm rather glad you didn't get the letter, because it was sort of silly. I was feeling very badly at the time."

"I wish I had received it," said Rod, boldly. "It would have changed my views about a lot of things. I felt very harshly about you, Miss Thomas."

"And that day I met you in the corridor I was going to thank you for saving me from falling downstairs, but you brushed right by me and gave me a look that almost petrified me."

He laughed at the recollection. "That was the time I was feeling most harshly about you. I had just been ordered to my cabin."

"Do you think I am a perfect idiot?"

He gazed at her contentedly.

"Certainly not."

"I was. I have learned a lot since I came on board this ship. In the schools where I was educated they had all sorts of rules and regulations about how a young woman should behave under all circumstances. The one they insisted upon most emphatically was that a remark from a person who had not been introduced must be ignored in such a pointed way that it would not be repeated. You rather surprised me that first day, because I didn't know any one was near me, and I reacted according to my training."

"You did it darn' well, I'll tell the world."

She dimpled with her smile. "I felt so sorry for you when I saw how I had squelched you. And then when we came for our deck chairs, and I found you sitting beside us, I am afraid I was conceited enough to think that you were persistent in wanting to know me, and my training got the better of me again."

"After all, it is the way a young lady should behave."

"Is it? I wonder. Anyway I am innocent of everything that happened after that. Do you believe me?"

"Of course," said Rod heartily. "It was a chapter of queer accidents."

"If you hadn't been such a goose and hurried off when you picked me off the stairs we would have been chummy immediately. And then nothing would have happened."

"I was a fool."

She nodded affirmatively. Having convinced this man that he was to blame for all his misfortunes instead of herself, she felt much better. But she wanted to know something else.

"You know, Mr. McGarry, there is one thing which bothers me. It is whether you did like me when you first saw me or whether you didn't pay any attention to me at all, and were surprised when I began to pester you with undeserved rebuffs."

"I thought you were the prettiest girl I had ever seen, and one of the nicest. That made it more bitter when you seemed determined to persecute me for being alive."

"I'm glad of that," she declared, dimpling all over. "My vanity is assuaged. For a couple of days I was afraid you hadn't liked me at all. I'm so glad we had this talk."

She held out her hand, man fashion, and Rod shook it so heartily that she winced and showed him how he had jammed her rings into her fingers. Then she arose, and swayed a bit with the motion of the ship.

"Won't you let me escort you indoors. She is rolling quite a lot now."

With a hand under her left arm he conducted her to the first saloon entrance, passing Howard Campbell, who was talking to Mrs. Potter-Dunlap. Howard gazed at the pair with amazement, incredulity and resentment. How had they become acquainted and friendly in the short time since he had left Rod in his deck chair?

As the afternoon waned the uneven movement of the ship increased. In addition to her slow side roll she had acquired a fore and aft motion which was very disconcerting. And every now and then she appeared to give herself a shake like a huge Newfoundland dog that has been in swimming, and now tries to tumble the water out of his fur.

The sea had assumed a pale gray color mingled with masses of foam. The boys had looked for waves "rolling mountain high," but instead they saw just a ruffled surface, not so different in appearance from the ripples on a millpond except that each ripple was many feet in dimensions instead of many inches.

Looking down on the ocean from the high sides of an ocean liner it is difficult to appreciate just how heavy a sea is running. Had they been upon a sailing vessel of moderate dimensions they would have known they were in a storm, but the Durania, despite her rolling and pitching, gave the effect of being rather indifferent to what the wild waves were saying.

Every now and then she pushed her bow into the crest of a mound of water, most of which came on board and drenched the forward deck and the officers on the bridge. But so well had they sheltered the passengers that only the spray on the windows of the shelter deck indicated that the billows had lifted their white fingers a distance of forty feet above the surface.

The motion was sufficient to dispose of the passengers, for the most part. When dinner time came there was hardly a corporal's guard on duty. Racks had been placed upon the table, for the first time in a dozen voyages according to Campbell's steward. Rod had overcome his reluctance to going into the dining saloon as a result of his chat with Gertrude. She represented the passenger list to him. With her countenance assured, he no longer took interest in the views of his fellow passengers.

It was a curious experience for the boys to sit in the big dining saloon of the ship during a storm. Every now and then the floor would just drop from under them, a sensation similar to that felt in a speed elevator when it starts. Again they would be carried upward unexpectedly. Nothing remained horizontal. The dining saloon looked as if it were trying to balance itself on its ends.

The steward, bearing trays of food, navigated the room with the skill of experience, but a crash of crockery indicated, every now and then, that some one had lost his balance.

Rod had a plate of soup in front of him. The rack was an inch and a half board which was placed all the way around the edge of the table to prevent the dishes and silverware from sliding into the laps of the customers. Rod's plate suddenly left him and slipped across the table where it bumped against the rack on Howard's side of the table. Howard's plate had also gone on a journey.

The two inlanders looked up. Each noticed that the other looked pale and drawn. Simultaneously they decided that dinner was not worth the effort. Rather painfully they made their way from the dining saloon and crawled to their cabin where they undressed and got into their berths.

"I'm not sick," explained Howard; "that is, seasick. But I ate too much at lunch, and this motion interferes with the digestive operation."

"Well, I'm feeling darn' funny, and I don't like it," grumbled Rod. "I wish this ship would get quiet again."

Social intercourse was intermittent where it existed at all on the Durania that evening. Gertrude had found Mary Norman and cried in her arms while both were feeling rather indifferent to further existence. Mrs. Potter-Dunlap forgot the loss of her jewels in the loss of her dinner. The bridge game which Mr. Higginson had played steadily was suspended for lack of players, and the quiet little man sat almost alone in the smoke room with a drink in front of him and pulling on a long black cigar.

Wind and wave, however, mean nothing to the wireless, and a message had leaped from the poles on top of a station in Newfoundland to the Durania in midatlantic, which was delivered to Captain Brown as he took his dinner in his own cabin.

It came from the detective in Kansas City who had been at work tracing Howard Campbell. It read:

Howard Campbell, son of a carpenter in Kansas City. No visible means of support. Graduated from the university, but has had no employment since. If posing as wealthy man, did not secure funds in Kansas City. Has no police record.

The captain read the message through two or three times and wagged his head

very gravely. Then he sent for the purser. "What do you think?" he demanded.

"Rather suspicious. Here is a young fellow passing himself off as a millionaire. He pays attention to the Potter-Dunlaps, though the girl is as homely as a hedge fence, which proves that it was not her charm that drew him. He is very chummy with them, and is in their stateroom on the night the jewels were taken. Probably saw the lady put them away. If he were a millionaire we would not suspect him of sneaking back and purloining them, but, being what this wireless says he is, I think he is a proper object for investigation."

"Lots of young fellows come aboard ship and try to create impressions of great wealth when they haven't any more than the price of their ticket." This came from the captain. "The Americans call it four-flushing. It's harmless enough. This fellow might have been trying to have the girl fall in love with him; make a rich marriage; no idea of walking off with the mater's jewels."

"That's true, captain. What we will do is go through his stateroom while he and this McGarry are at breakfast in the morning. If we find nothing, I think that wireless justifies us in searching their persons. It's a serious thing to do, but it's better than searching everybody on board, which we talked about yesterday."

"Yes, I certainly hate to do that. On the other hand the jewels are on the ship. You know as well as I do that hiding places on these ships are hard to find, and the thief is more apt to have the gems on his person until he finds that there is going to be a personal search. Then he may get desperate and place them in what he thinks is a safe hiding place, but what we know from experience is nothing of the kind."

The captain called attention to something which few travelers realize. Despite the vast bulk of a liner, its innumerable rooms and passages, its holds and engine space, there is virtually no way of hiding anything if the ship's company make a serious search.

There are several hundred stewards, each with a certain number of cabins allotted to him. He knows every inch of

his allotted space. So efficiently and plainly are the cabins constructed that nothing is out of reach, everything can be taken down, pulled apart and cleaned.

The public rooms and decks are gone over with minute care every day; no tucking a small package away in these rooms without certainty of its being found.

The quarters of the stewards, the stokers, the seamen, and the officers are all as lacking in hiding places. Stolen property would probably be concealed in personal effects; no other place for it.

So Howard's premonition that he might come under suspicion of having helped himself to the jewels of the Potter-Dunlaps, was justified by facts. He was suspected, and the captain was sustained by a police report from Kansas City which made him out to be practically a vagrant. He was shown up to be a pretender, and a pretender may easily be a thief. Their harmless little deception was about to react upon both Howard and Rod in a manner of which they had never dreamed.

The two youths managed to fall asleep after a hectic evening in their berths, and they awakened ten hours later to find the ship steady, the sun pouring through the portholes, and their illness vanished.

They were full of good spirits as they bathed and dressed, and they were out on deck before the breakfast bugle blew. When it came they were ready, and made up for their fast of the evening before by consuming two orders, each, of ham and eggs.

While this was going on the purser led his assistant and the stateroom steward into Campbell's stateroom, and rapidly, but with great care, they went through the contents of the trunks and bags of both boys, opening up each article of apparel, carefully refolding it and replacing it so that the search would not be noticed.

Howard had a habit of rolling his stockings into balls for packing purposes. The steward squeezed each ball. He had passed twenty of them when he uttered an exclamation; he had noticed something hard inside. He unrolled the stockings and drew out a pair of diamond earrings. They were down on the inventory of Mrs. Potter-Dun-

lap's losses as worth two thousand five hundred dollars. There was no mistake about it, and their location, hidden in a pair of stockings, made it evident that they were placed there for concealment.

CHAPTER XX.

UNDER ARREST AGAIN.

IT was all the purser needed to make the search ruthless. He did not care now whether the occupants of the room returned and caught him at it.

Every article of clothing was pried and even torn apart. The soles and heels of shoes were tapped and torn in an effort to discover more loot. When they were through the room looked like chaos, and many articles of clothing could never be worn again. But the purser had recovered only the pair of earrings.

"He is more crafty than any liner thief I have ever come across," said the purser. "It was pure luck we found the earrings. A less careful search would have passed those stocking balls over. There is nothing to do but to have the captain sweat the pair of them and make them confess where they have hidden the rest of the stuff."

As the investigating committee emerged into the corridor, they encountered Howard and Rod on their way back from breakfast.

"Will you two gentlemen kindly accompany me to the captain's cabin at once?" asked the purser in a tone which left only one reply. They followed him, wondering with mild concern what might be the trouble now.

Captain Brown greeted them curtly. "I presume you have some reason for bringing these gentlemen here, this morning," he said to the purser. That official replied by laying the earrings upon the table in front of the skipper.

"Article four on the inventory of Mrs. Potter-Dunlap's losses. Found in a stocking in a trunk belonging to Mr. Campbell in his stateroom, also occupied by Mr. McGarry. So I brought them both along."

Howard looked at the pair of earrings with unbelieving eyes. He had seen them on the lady two nights before, but how

could they have come in a stocking in his trunk? Who had put them there?

That anybody could seriously think that he had stolen Mrs. Potter-Dunlap's trinkets seemed to him so utterly preposterous that he burst out laughing, which was the worst thing he could have done in the presence of Captain Brown.

"Young man," began the captain with great severeness. "I shall soon convince you that this is no laughing matter. These earrings were stolen and hidden in your room. You will find a British judge and jury ready to impose a heavy sentence upon you. If you aid the cause of justice by revealing where you secreted the rest of the gems, it may help your case."

"Why, captain, you don't actually think I took them?" demanded Howard regaining his composure, and rapidly growing pale at the suggestion of jail.

"I am sorry to say I am convinced of it. We have sent a radio to Kansas City to investigate you, young man, for you were one of the suspects from the first. You had succeeded in creating the impression, on board this ship, that you were very wealthy. I find that you have no visible means of support. That is bad enough, but we discover part of the stolen goods hidden in your room. Now you had better talk quick. I have no patience with you."

"Well, I didn't put those earrings in my trunk and I don't know how they came there," said Howard sullenly.

"Then you refuse to help us."

"I don't refuse. I can't."

"Perhaps Mr. McGarry can throw some light on the subject," said the purser, casting an unfriendly look upon Rod, who had been too dumfounded during this conversation to take part in it.

"I am sure Mr. Campbell had nothing to do with the robbery. I have known him for half a dozen years and he couldn't possibly do such a thing."

"Well," said the purser. "You share his stateroom. Maybe you put those earrings in his trunk."

"Thank you for the suggestion. I didn't."

"I've had trouble enough with you," growled the captain to Rod, "and now

your friend and alleged employer turns out to be a thief. I'm going to lock the pair of you up, for the voyage, in the brig. You might have got out of your stateroom while you were supposed to be under arrest. I didn't assign anybody to guard you."

"I suggest you send a wireless to Kansas City asking my financial standing, instead of Mr. Campbell's. Please wire to president Sanford of the Farmers' and Artisans' National Bank in Kansas City."

"I've sent enough wireless telegrams. I'm satisfied you are a couple of crooks. Anyway, I have evidence enough to hold you. Stolen property was in your room. If they don't know your employer in Kansas City, it's pretty sure they never heard of you."

"Mr. Campbell is not my employer. I am paying him one hundred dollars a week to travel with me. It was my suggestion that he act as my boss on this trip. I had a personal reason for not wishing to attract attention."

"I bet you had. It's a damn' queer business," declared the commander.

"I'm merely clearing him of the suspicion that he was four-flushing on board this ship."

"If Campbell has no money, all the more reason for his being a thief. I don't mind telling you I didn't like the looks of you from the first, and your manner was truculent and insolent. Now I won't stand any more nonsense from either of you. Purser, put them in the brig."

"Aw, come, captain, have a heart. Let us stay in our stateroom. We can't get away. And when you find you are mistaken about us, you'll have saved your company a damage suit that will worry it a lot."

This was from Campbell who had recovered his spirits as a result of Rod's championship.

"Don't talk to me, young man. You are too glib."

"May I suggest that the stateroom will be safe enough for them?" said the purser. I'll station a man in the corridor and see that they communicate with nobody."

"Have it your own way. You are responsible for them."

The purser motioned to the youths that the interview was over, but Rod was not through.

"Is there any objection to my sending a wireless to the bank?" he demanded.

"I don't care what the references are, I've got the goods on you."

"Supposing my bank guarantees the total value of these jewels in return for you not subjecting us to arrest. I have half a million dollars on deposit with them."

Captain Brown's demeanor underwent a subtle change. Half a million dollars was much more than a hundred thousand pounds. He must not make an error in this matter. Rod saw that he was weakening and he followed it up.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that the real thief might have hidden those earrings in my room to throw suspicion on Mr. Campbell. I understand that about seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of jewelry was taken. He could spare twenty-five hundred for the sake of security. If you turn us over to the authorities charged with the theft, the real thief will leave the ship with the rest of the jewelry. I can prove our financial responsibility and then where are you? You must find all the jewelry before the ship reaches Plymouth."

Captain Brown sat down again.

"Mr. McGarry, that's a pretty good argument. If you can get this bank to guarantee you, as you said, I will not place you under arrest. And we must find the rest of the jewels before the ship docks. You are sure there was nothing else in that stateroom?" He had turned to the purser.

"Quite sure."

"We've got to make a general search, confound it. Even finding part of the loot in their room is no proof that they stole it. Anybody could have sneaked into the stateroom while they were on deck and hidden those earrings in order to distract suspicion from themselves. Have you enemies on board?"

Yesterday morning Rod would have said that he had—Gertrude, but he knew better to-day. But there was a man on board who was not his enemy, but who might be interested in using him to save himself.

"Captain, there is a man on this ship

that we met before. He scraped acquaintance with Mr. Campbell and played bridge in our compartment coming down from Chicago to New York. That night the room was entered and twenty-five hundred dollars taken from my wallet which I had placed under my pillow.

"He had left the train at an intermediate point, and I didn't discover the loss until we reached New York. I have no evidence against this man and we both have exchanged greetings with him on board. I feel sure I saw him dealing a card off the bottom of the pack in the smokeroom the other day and it is my personal opinion he is a crook. If he stole those jewels, it might have occurred to him to throw suspicion on us by hiding one of the pieces in our stateroom."

"Who is this man?"

"I don't want to say now. I've had experience enough of being suspected unjustly without accusing some one else unless I have some real evidence."

"You better tell me, I'll have his stateroom searched without his knowing it," said the purser.

"You may be sure you won't find anything."

"Mr. McGarry is right," declared the captain. "If this man is a professional crook, he knows better than hide his loot in his own stateroom. The fact that you found anything in Campbell's room proves he's an amateur, if he is a crook at all."

"Thanks for that admission, anyway," said Howard.

"You gentlemen go to your stateroom and stay there," admonished the captain. "You are not out of the woods yet. Mr. McGarry may send that wireless. I'll have our agent see the president of this bank and confirm any reply which is sent to him. If everything is O. K., you will be released at once and we'll continue our search. Better tell me the name of the man you suspect."

"It's Higginson."

The purser laughed. "Why Mr. Higginson has crossed with us half a dozen times. He never plays for high stakes and he never makes the slightest trouble."

"Ever have any robberies while he was on board?" asked the captain.

"Nothing was ever reported as lost. You would have heard of it if anything had happened."

"Of course, of course. Well, good morning, gentlemen. I certainly hope you can clear yourselves."

Escorted by the purser they returned to their stateroom. It was a lovely day outside and their enforced seclusion did not appeal to them at all.

"And they call this traveling for pleasure," groaned Rod. "Precious little pleasure I've had since I came into my money."

"We are in a hell of a fix," declared Howard. "Supposing old Sanford refuses to come through in response to your wireless."

"He has got to. He's only my agent. But you were talking yesterday of discovering who stole those jewels. Now we've got to do it to clear ourselves. It's ten to one it was Higginson because nobody else would have picked us out to hide his loot. He knew from experience that we were a couple of boobs."

"I'll get him if I have to push him in a corner and squeeze the truth out of him."

"Find out where he has hidden the stuff, that's the only way."

Rod sent his wireless and they spent several hours in fruitless discussion.

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. THOMAS SHARES HER BAD NEWS.

IN the cabin directly above a different sort of discussion was going on. Gertrude had been unable to talk to her mother the night before because seasickness had combined with her mental anguish to make her impossible.

The young girl had been affected by the motion of the ship, but she forgot her nausea in caring for the older woman who also kept the stewardess running back and forth with hot water and other useless aids to such a condition. Toward morning, Mrs. Thomas fell asleep and Gertrude was so tired that she slept soundly also.

In the morning, her illness had left her and she went on deck with a hope, unad-

mitted, that she might meet Rod McGarry and continue their interesting conversation of the day before where it had left off. She did not see either Rod or Howard, for the excellent reason that they had been marched off by the purser to the captain's cabin. And she did not encounter them later in the day because they were both in durance vile.

She did meet Mary Norman and the two became fast friends again. It pleased Mary greatly that Gertrude was now really interested in Rod. She knew that under ordinary circumstances a girl of her type would not be apt to pay much attention to a shy young countryman from the West, and it was rather poetic justice that Gertrude's initial aversion to him should have resulted in her thinking a lot about him.

When Gertrude went to her stateroom after lunch, she found her mother so much better that she felt entitled to demand an explanation of something which had been troubling her. Knowing her mother, she went straight to the point.

"What did you do with that letter to Mr. McGarry that you intercepted the other day? That's old fashioned stuff, mother, and you ought to know you couldn't get away with it."

Mrs. Thomas assumed her daughter had the facts and she did not beat around the bush.

"I saw no reason why you should write a letter to an objectionable person to whom you had never been introduced."

"He's not objectionable. On the contrary, he is charming and I hope to know him very well."

"Do you mean to say you have been seeing this person?"

"Spent part of the afternoon with him yesterday. I went right up and spoke to him and apologized for your behavior as well as my own."

"Well," gasped Mrs. Thomas. "I never heard of such a thing in my life. That a daughter of mine—"

"Oh, mother, don't bother to talk like that. Don't you know you had no right to take my letter. Where is it?"

"I tore it up and dropped it out a port-hole."

"Well, that's that. As Mr. McGarry and myself are now good friends, it doesn't matter any more."

"If you must associate with Westerners, why don't you spend your time with that nice Mr. Campbell?"

"I prefer Mr. McGarry."

"But Mr. Campbell is rich, and the other man is his servant."

"A secretary is not a servant and what do I care if Mr. Campbell is rich?"

Mrs. Thomas gritted her teeth. She could not retain her secret any longer.

"You little idiot, your father has failed in business. We must go home by the next steamer, and you spend your time with secretaries instead of an eligible man."

Gertrude's eyes filled with tears.

"Father has failed," she said slowly. "How do you know?"

"I got a wireless from him. The company is in a receiver's hands. It means we have lost everything."

"Poor father. What a blow it will be to him." She squared her shoulders. "At least I have my college degree. I can teach or become a librarian."

"Miserable, poverty-stricken occupations. This Mr. Campbell is interested in you. Any one could see that. Why don't you give him some encouragement?"

"Mother!" gasped Gertrude. "I didn't know people thought such things outside fiction. Do you suppose I could encourage a man simply because he has money?"

"If you married that hulking secretary, you would find that money would become important. You have never wanted for anything in your life. Everything that money could buy has been lavished upon you. You cost us more than five thousand dollars a year while you were going to college. If you went into society in Boston you would cost us ten thousand at least until you found a husband. And you tell me you don't see the importance of money."

"I'm heartbroken for you and father, but the prospect doesn't frighten me a bit. Mary Norman hasn't any money and I don't see but that she gets along quite as well as anybody else. I didn't like Mr. Campbell very much before, and now I'm going to hate the sight of him."

"I might have known better than to expect coöperation from you," sighed Mrs. Thomas.

"If scheming to marry a man for his money is coöperation, then I have none to offer. Why, you will make me ashamed to look at a man if you put such ideas in my head. I have never given marriage a thought, but if I ever do marry, it will be because I am crazy about the man, and not his money."

"You must not expect me to support you because I won't be able to on the pittance I'll have left after your father's affairs are settled."

"At least my fare is paid on this ship and I hope on the one in which we shall return. And afterward, I shall support myself."

Gertrude flounced out of the stateroom and sought her deck chair in a mood of mingled depression and indignation. Sorrow for her father and wrath at her mother's mercenary and selfish views divided her mind. She picked up a magazine but the pages were all blurred.

There was nobody sitting near and finally she pulled her hat over her eyes and indulged in a quiet cry. Then she sought the ladies' room to see if her eyes were red. Afterward, she toured the deck alone in hope that a certain person would join her. But he was invisible.

Late in the afternoon the purser knocked at their stateroom door to ask the boys to go up to the captain's cabin.

"Did he get a reply to my wireless?" asked Rod anxiously.

"I think so," said the purser. "He will tell you."

They found the skipper in a more agreeable mood. He shook hands with both McGarry and Campbell and invited them to sit down.

"My agent in Kansas City has seen the president of the bank and he has given you a clean bill of health, Mr. McGarry. He says that you have vast interests in his charge and he will guarantee your responsibility up to the sum you mention. I am very glad of that."

"That's fine!" exclaimed Rod. "It's not pleasant to be suspected of theft."

"But there is still the question of Mr. Campbell. Mr. Sanford does not know him. He admits that he is impecunious and he was the last person with the Potter-Dunlaps the night they were robbed."

"I personally assume responsibility for Mr. Campbell. Does that satisfy you?"

"It will have to. But we still have to find the thief."

"I went through Higginson's stateroom with great care while he was playing bridge in the smoke room this afternoon," said the purser. "There was absolutely nothing there."

"Well," said the captain, "I am going to postpone the very disagreeable duty of searching the passengers and crew to the last possible minute. I cannot assume the responsibility of searching the person of Mr. Higginson unless there is a general search."

"Couldn't it be done unofficially?" asked Rod.

"How do you mean?"

"Suppose Campbell and myself held him up and went through him. The ship's officers would have nothing to do with that."

"I couldn't countenance any such action."

"But if we found the goods on him?"

"That would be all right, but if you didn't, he would complain, and I'd have to put you under arrest and turn you over to the authorities when we reach Plymouth."

"I've been under arrest for one thing or another ever since this voyage started," declared Rod. "I've got a grudge against this fellow since the train experience from Chicago. I'm willing to take a chance. Couldn't you tip off the authorities what our real motives were and get us off easy?"

"Possibly, but I wouldn't want to guarantee it. If you could solve this mystery you would save me from great embarrassment."

"If he has the jewels," said the purser, "he is probably carrying them on his person until he gets word of a general search. Then he has some sort of hiding place ready, but he probably wouldn't want to risk putting them there until it was necessary."

"Isn't there a customs examination at

Plymouth which would take that problem off your hands?" asked Campbell.

"British customs are not like American customs. It's a perfunctory examination. Of course, we could have suspected persons thoroughly searched. And it's possible he has a confederate among the crew who would hold the jewels until there was a chance of turning them over to him. In that case, no customs search would avail anything."

"I'm going to take the chance," declared Rod.

"Then you can expect severe treatment at my hands if you fail," smiled the captain. "But I wish you luck."

"And we are out of jail again."

"I trust you won't be arrested again during the voyage."

They shook hands all around and the boys descended to the promenade deck.

"Do you really mean to hold up Higginson?" demanded Campbell.

"I certainly do."

"How are you going to do it?"

"You go down to the smokeroom and horn into his bridge game. Here's a hundred dollars. Play all the evening. Then invite him down to our stateroom for a bottle of champagne."

"What makes you so darn sure he did it?"

"Because he is the only person on board who would think of planting those earrings in our room. Don't you see that it must be he?"

"But supposing he hasn't got the jewels on him? He could send us to jail."

"I'm doing this for your sake. You are still under suspicion, the captain said. We can't go along with you suspected of being a thief. You won't be really cleared unless we find the thief. I am liable to be stuck for the value of those jewels if they are not found when the ship gets to port, and they might try you for the theft anyway. I'm cleared, but you are only loose on my recognizance."

Howard looked despondent. "What a lot I've let you in for! You know I didn't touch the darn jewels, don't you, Rod?"

"Of course. You aren't much good, but you are no crook."

"Thanks, old man. I appreciate the way you have stood by me."

"Forget it."

"I guess I'll take a stroll with Miss Thomas if I can find her," said Howard, his spirits rebounding as usual.

"I guess you won't. You go to the smokeroom. I'm going to find her myself."

"Darn it, Rod, look here! I'm in love with that girl and you are not. Don't go butting in on my game."

"How do you know I'm not in love with her?"

"You couldn't be. Look what she did to you."

CHAPTER XXII.

ROD SEES MORE OF GERTRUDE.

"IT isn't how a woman treats you that makes you fall in love with her," said Rod thoughtfully. "By rights I ought to hate her, even after she explained everything so cleverly. I don't know that I am in love with her."

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I won't look her up while we are working on this Higginson matter. You go to the smokeroom and join him. I'd do it myself, but I can't play bridge. I'll go off into a corner and read a book. Fair field and no favor."

"You are a corker," declared Howard gratefully. "Now watch me turn detective."

He started down to the smokeroom and Rod turned into the ship's library in search of a book. Sitting in a big chair next the bookcase was Gertrude Thomas. She bowed and smiled at him.

"This is fate," thought Rod. "Nobody could blame me for taking advantage of it. Heaven knows I didn't go hunting for her."

So he went over and sat alongside Gertrude. Several old ladies tucked away in corners of the big room watched them and nodded their heads.

Of course the story that she had reported him to the captain for daring to address her had gone all over the ship, and to see her pulling aside her skirts to make room for him gave them a topic for an entire evening's gossip. One or two nodded to others. Each knew what was passing

through the minds of the rest. The girl was no better than she should be.

"Where have you been all day?" asked Gertrude, brightly.

"Locked up again in my stateroom."

"Heavens, you haven't been speaking to any more prudes."

"Worse. I was suspected of stealing Mrs. Potter-Dunlap's hardware."

"Why, how ridiculous!"

"It's nice of you to say that," he remarked with gratitude.

"Of course, you couldn't do such a thing. Who was silly enough to think so?"

"It was a joint charge. Howard and myself were both suspected."

"Even more preposterous. Why, he could buy and sell Mrs. Potter-Dunlap from what I hear."

"Not exactly that, but we convinced the captain that we were not guilty, even though a piece of the stolen jewelry was found hidden in our room."

"And have they found the thief?"

"Not yet."

"Then how did you get loose?"

"We got references from a bank in Kansas City which guaranteed the total value of the jewels."

"How wonderful to be rich," said Gertrude with a sigh. Her own poverty was beginning to be brought home to her. "If it hadn't been for Mr. Campbell you would be in terrible trouble, wouldn't you?"

Rod could not inform her of the true situation between Howard and himself, particularly in view of Howard's confession of love a few minutes ago. He begged the question.

"This is in strict confidence, you know. No one knows we were under suspicion, and we've been in trouble enough without that."

"All my fault," she said contritely.

"I'm sort of glad of it now."

"Why?"

"Because it has permitted me to become acquainted with you; to know the sort of girl you really are. I didn't know there were girls like you."

"How absurd! There are lots of girls like me."

"I don't believe so. Anyway, I never met any."

"What kind of girls have you met?"

"I come from a little town in Oklahoma called Otamie. I worked hard all my life on a farm except for four years I put in at college in Kansas City. The girls I knew were small town girls, not pretty particularly and not interesting to me. Some of them were well educated, but they seemed sort of narrow."

"I should think you would call me narrow, after our first meeting."

"I've forgotten that. I'm only thinking how nice you are now."

The conversation was becoming interesting, but it was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Thomas. From the doorway she espied the pair and she determined that the party would be broken up immediately. So she sailed down upon Gertrude, pointedly ignoring her companion.

"Gertrude, please come with me at once. I wish to dress for dinner and, as I have no maid with me, I would like you to hook my gown."

"Yes, mother," she assented, darting a look of understanding at her parent. "I wish to present you to Mr. McGarry."

"How do you do, Mrs. Thomas," said Rod, extending a large and calloused palm.

Mrs. Thomas looked him over from head to foot with an appraising stare which embarrassed and confused him. She ignored his hand, inclined her head very slightly, murmured "How do you do," and turned her back on him. Gertrude threw him a compensating smile. Then they went away.

Somehow Rod was not downcast, despite the freezing manner of Mrs. Thomas. Gertrude had been delightful. He had been afraid that her kindness at their first interview might have been caused by a desire to make up to him for the inconvenience and pain she had caused him. But this afternoon she had welcomed his coming, chatted in a most charming and amicable fashion and seemed inclined to regard him as a man she did not mind knowing well.

He walked on air for a while and then entered the smokeroom, where he found Howard in a bridge game in which Higginson was a participant. It happened to be his turn to act as dummy, so he left his seat and joined Rod.

"How are you getting on?" the latter inquired.

"Fine! I had no trouble playing; he was just getting up a game. Really, old man, I think you are wrong about him. Nobody with seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of stolen jewelry on his person could be so care-free and contented as he seems. He is playing a peach of a game, and I assure you he is not dealing off the bottom, or trying any tricks?"

"How would you know? You are in the game. I tell you I saw him cheat the other day."

"We're taking an awful chance in trying to hold him up. I've got cold feet. It's worrying me so I am losing money."

"I can stand it: You stick in the game, and join him again after dinner."

"Did you see Miss Thomas?"

"Why," explained Rod in some embarrassment, "I met her accidentally in the library and talked to her a while. Then her mother swooped down on us and dragged her away. I assure you I didn't try to find her."

"It's a darn shame to tie me up in here while you are out making good with my girl."

"How do you get that way?" demanded Rod in exasperation. "She isn't your girl."

"Well, I love her."

"Darn it, so do I." He caught himself in amazement when the words slipped out. Howard's declaration had drawn his. It had not occurred to him to analyze his feelings for Gertrude, but now he knew that he had spoken the truth; he did love the girl, had loved her from the moment he had seen her turning away from him as the ship passed the Statue of Liberty.

That was why he had suffered so keenly during his incarceration; why he had spent so much of his days and nights thinking about her. Even when he was proclaiming his detestation of her abominable conduct he actually had been yearning for her, although he did not know it.

Howard had turned mean.

"You love her! Fat chance you've got, with your big hands and feet and the way you wear your clothes. Catch a Wellesley

College girl falling for a hick from Otamie, Oklahoma!"

Rod winced because he feared what the boy had said was true, and he recognized that it was drawn forth by the more or less honorable emotion of jealousy.

"I'd make the girl a better husband than you would," he retorted, "but I suppose your airs and graces would be preferred by any woman to what I've got to offer."

"Your money won't do you any good here," Howard continued, following up his advantage. "She's got oodles of it, and she is in society. Why, she'd laugh herself sick at the idea of you falling in love with her."

"Hey, Campbell, come back here," called Higginson. The hand had been completed.

"I won't charge those remarks against you because you are jealous," said Rod slowly. "But they were rotten, just the same."

"Sorry, old man," Howard declared, patting him on the arm. "I'm jealous, all right. Forget what I said. You are a better man than I am."

His quick change of mood was not actuated by self-interest this time, but by one of those decent reactions which made him so likable.

However, the poison had been administered. Rod sat in an agony of self-abasement. How absurd he had been to try to cultivate the liking of such a girl as Gertrude. She was worlds above him in every way. He was not handsome, quick-witted and debonair like Campbell. She had been very sorry for him, and that was all there was to it.

He lounged about in the smoke room, getting into desultory conversation with several smokers until dinner time. Rod had become accustomed to the continual drinking, and not infrequent drunkenness, of the Durania's smoke room. Men and women were continually coming in for drinks, sitting about half an hour, going out and giving place to others. The stewards were always flitting about serving white wine and red liquor.

Convinced as he was of the rightness of prohibition, the excessive drinking on the ship only strengthened his opinion. He did

not appreciate that it was the exuberance of Americans rejoicing in unaccustomed liberty.

He was too young to remember the pre-Volstead days in the restaurants and cafés of big cities. He assumed they had been like the scenes in the smoke room of the liner. In which, of course, he was in error.

At dinner that night Howard and Rod completed their plot. When the smoke room closed Howard was to invite Higginson down for an extra bottle of wine, and avoid other guests. Once in their state-room they would overpower him and search him thoroughly. It was a crack-brained scheme, even with the tacit agreement of the captain of the steamer, but they were young and desperate enough to take chances.

Rod was following a hunch. He simply knew that Higginson had planted the loot in his room and counted on its being discovered and the boys placed under arrest. Among the four hundred passengers they had no other men acquaintances, so the selection of their cabin as a hiding place must have been the work of their gambling acquaintance of the Twentieth Century Limited. As nothing had been said about the discovery of the earrings by the ship's officers, Higginson would naturally suppose that they were still hidden in Howard Campbell's trunk.

Howard was considerably ashamed of himself for his outburst against Rod, and tried to fix things during dinner, but he had no effect on his friend. Rod understood that the remarks were made from pique, but he had a feeling that they were perfectly true.

After dinner Mrs. Thomas led Gertrude into the ladies' parlor and began her evening bridge game with three matrons whom she had already encountered at cards on the ship. For a while Gertrude read a library book close by.

The strains of the orchestra drew the young girl from the room. She cast her eye about for acquaintances, but Mary Norman was busy with a young man who had been attending her since Howard had defaulted. Mrs. and Miss Dupoy were playing cards in the social hall, and Gertrude wandered

out upon the deck. It was an ideal summer night at sea. The moon was shedding a golden radiance and the black waters were gilded where its rays fell upon them. A few clouds obscured it now and then, making the contrast still more glorious when it emerged.

Young men and women were moving up and down the decks in light dresses and white shirt fronts. Groups hung outside the entrance to the first cabin hallway where the orchestra was stationed, listening to the music. The band was playing selections from "Pinafore," that exquisite, melodic story of a fantastic battleship. The air was warm and like velvet, perfumed with the soft scent of the sea. It was a night for romance and beauty.

It was no night for a girl to be alone. Many men gazed wistfully at the beautiful young thing, but her reputation for austerity protected her from companionship. And so she finally came upon Rod, who was leaning disconsolately over the rail, gazing down at the troubled waters along the side of the ship, with its flashes of phosphorescence. She boldly approached and stood beside him. He did not observe her presence.

"Are you looking for the Statue of Liberty?" she queried with a smile.

He gave a violent start. He had been thinking of her, and her low pitched, gentle voice made him lose his composure. He managed to mumble a greeting.

"What were you thinking about—the horrors of the secretarial profession?"

He smiled one of his slow, boyish and very attractive smiles.

"I was just wondering what chance a fellow would have if he fell overboard. Would he get caught by the propeller and chewed up, or would he be eaten by a shark, or would he just swim about, getting weaker and weaker, and finally drown?"

"What a cheerful notion! You must be downcast even to consider such things. Are you in more trouble?"

"I'm in worse trouble than I have ever been in my life."

"Oh, really!" She was quite alarmed. "Is it that woman's jewelry?"

"That doesn't bother me. I'm just getting on to myself. I thought that if a fellow traveled and saw the world, if he rubbed shoulders with the cultured and intelligent people he met, he would acquire a polish and lose his roughness and uncouthness; but I can see that it was an absurd idea. A man can't become something he isn't. I am a farmer, and I'll be a farmer all my life, and I only make myself ridiculous by trying to be something else."

Now, Gertrude had once described him as uncouth, but curiously enough she did not remember it, and she could not conceive of any one considering this serious and good-looking and thoughtful young man in that way. She had always admired big men, perhaps because she was so little herself. And her college education had taught her that a farmer is not an absurd person, but one of the most useful and in fact the most essential worker the world possesses.

"I don't see anything to be ashamed of in being a farmer. It seems to me to be a more profitable occupation than that of a secretary. That seems a silly occupation for a big, strong man like you."

"I'm not a secretary," he said. "Howard and I decided to travel together, and we just assumed those relations. I do no work, in fact I don't know what a secretary's occupation may be, except to write letters. Aside from a couple of letters to his folks, Howard hasn't written any since we started. I have no family and hence I have written nothing."

"But you expect to do some work in the world, do you not?"

"I can live without working if I desire."

"Really! But do you think such a life is desirable? I have known a lot of idle people, and I never met any who were happy. The men I know in Boston, who have large incomes, work harder trying to amuse themselves than if they were doing some good in the world. When I get back to Boston I expect to go to work. I'm going to teach or become a librarian."

Rod swung around and faced her for the first time.

"You'll be getting married so quick you won't have time to do any work."

"I don't expect ever to marry."

"But why should you teach or do anything like that? Mary Norman told Howard you were very rich."

"We were rich, but not very rich. And now we are poor. My father failed in business since we started on this trip."

"Oh, Miss Thomas, I am so sorry!"

"I'm not. I am looking forward to earning my own living. I may even become a secretary just like you. Mother and I intend to return to America on the first ship back."

This was a shock. Somehow he had been thinking of Europe as a delightful new place which was going to contain Gertrude Thomas. And now she was going home without delay, and the flavor of anticipation turned sour in his mouth.

"I am a very fortunate girl," Gertrude continued. "During the years when I was growing up we always had everything we wished, and I went to wonderful schools and was graduated from college. Now I am equipped, and if I can't make this old world pay me good wages I'm not half as intelligent as I think I am."

"I bet you will make good," he declared with enthusiasm. "I went through college out in Missouri, but I worked my way through. I tended furnaces, delivered groceries, shoveled snow, mowed lawns and waited on table. Then I went back to the farm and drove a plow. I have worked hard all my life, and this is the first vacation I ever had. But it's only going to be a vacation. I'm going to go back to work, some work. But not a farm. I've served my time on a farm and I intend to live in a big city. I love the hum and bustle of a big city."

And so they talked by the hour. The moon went down and the decks gradually cleared, and finally there boomed six heavy strokes of the ship's bell.

"Goodness, it's eleven o'clock!" she declared. "Mother will be frantic wondering what has become of me. Thank you for a very delightful evening, Mr. McGarry."

She scurried down the deck and into the saloon entrance. Rod recalled that it was nearly time for the affair with Higginson. It had been the happiest evening of his life. The knowledge that Gertrude was poor

seemed to bring her nearer to him. He still did not actually think of himself as a wealthy man. And he might be all the things that Howard had said he was, but certainly she liked him. It was Gertrude who had sought him out, and they had talked for three solid hours without even sitting down.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. HIGGINSON IS HELD UP.

ROD went down to his stateroom and began preparations for the illegal and outrageous thing which he was contemplating. The stateroom was a large two-berth room with a wide couch under the porthole, upon which a third berth could be made up in case of necessity. It contained an easy chair and two camp stools. The trunks had been pushed under the lower berth and the bags lay in the bottom of a commodious wardrobe at the end of the berths.

There was about thirty square feet of maneuvering surface, quite enough. Higginson was not a large man. With Campbell's help, Rod expected to overpower him with considerable ease. He did not let himself consider the results of failure, because he did not expect to fail.

He had nearly three-quarters of an hour to wait before he heard a knock at the door and Howard entered with their victim.

"Hope we are not disturbing you, old man," he began. "They locked up the smoke room on us and I brought old Higginson down here for an extra quart of the stuff that makes you happy. I got the quart out of the bar one second before they closed the joint."

"Glad to have you, Mr. Higginson," said Rod. "I'm not a bridge player, so I haven't had a chance to see much of you. Won't you sit down?"

He indicated the easy chair. Higginson dropped into it with an affable smile.

Howard began to open the quart with an unsteady hand. Rod saw that he had been drinking quite a little, probably to brace up his courage. With a loud pop the cork

came out with part of the contents. But there was plenty left.

"I'll say Higgy is some bridge player, for he eased me out of a hundred and fifty to-night, and I'm a mean bridge player myself."

"Campbell is really very good," said Higginson. "It was the fortunes of war."

"I'm not kicking. Plenty more where that came from," declared Howard, perhaps ambiguously.

Rod was in a quandary. Here was his victim. He should leap upon him and get the job over with. But he hated to attack the man in such a cold-blooded manner. In a fight he would have been happy, but for two men—one of them much larger than the person assaulted—to fling themselves upon one—well, he hated to do it. So he made an error. He put him on his guard.

"Mr. Higginson," he declared, "you took twenty-two hundred dollars from my purse on the train! You robbed Mrs. Potter-Dunlap! You hid some of the loot in this stateroom!"

Higginson struggled to his feet. His face was purple.

"Why, you lying, treacherous, contemptible hound!" he began.

"I had you brought down here to choke the truth out of you," said Rod, moving toward him. "I believe you have those jewels on your person, and I'm going to get them."

Higginson leaped back against the wall, upon which two overcoats were hanging. With a lightning motion he brought into view a blunt-nosed automatic.

"Stand back there, you big hick, or I'll drill you full of holes."

The change in the man was marvelous. From a suave, quiet, unassuming business man, he had become a violent and vicious-looking assassin. There was no doubt that he would shoot.

From his position he covered both Rod and Howard. The latter had made no move forward and the sight of the gun unnerved him completely.

"Don't shoot!" he declared. "We give up."

Rod was made of sterner stuff. His grandfather had fought Indians. He

looked Higginson squarely in the eye and determined on his line of action.

"Higginson," he said, "if you didn't steal those jewels, you are going to shoot me, and it will be all right. But I think you stole them. If you did, and you shoot me, you will be held and investigated and the whole of your criminal past brought up before you get away. And then they'll hang you. So I don't think you are going to shoot me. Anyway, I'm going to take a chance. Pull the trigger if you want to."

He closed in steadily. Higginson pointed the gun directly at him, but he continued to advance. With his left hand the man drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. His right, holding the gun, dropped.

"I won't shoot you," he said. "You are a nervy yegg. I did not steal those jewels, but I have reasons for not wishing to be mixed up in a shooting affray, and, rather than do so, I'll let you search me. But after you are through, I will go to the captain and report the outrage. And I will prosecute you in the courts in England for the crime."

As he talked, Rod had closed with him and pulled the gun out of his hand.

"Go ahead. I won't fight about it," said Higginson. They took him at his word, stripped him to the skin, cut into the heels of his shoes and found—nothing.

Disheartened, they motioned to Higginson to dress, which he proceeded to do in silence and with great rapidity. His face wore a sneer of triumph. He took up his money, some six hundred dollars in cash, a book of traveler's checks and a letter of credit, his watch and some loose papers, all of which they had laid upon the lower berth. He regarded his shoes, from which the heels had been pried, with perplexity.

"We'll get you a new pair of shoes, of course," proffered Howard.

"You won't be able to get anything, where you are going to be," declared Higginson, quietly, but with conviction. "I'll walk on the toes of these until I get to my stateroom and change. Then I'm going to wake up the captain and have you two burglars put in whatever corresponds to a dungeon on this ship."

"I think they call it the 'brig'," suggested Rod.

"Well, whatever it is you'll stay there until the ship gets to port. Then I'll have you handed over to the police and you'll probably get five years in a British jail. I hope you'll like it."

"If you don't mind, I'll keep your gun," said Rod, "until we get what you are going to have done to us."

"Suit yourselves. So you thought I was a crook, did you? I hope you know better now."

"I thought you were a crook, and now I know it," declared Rod. "And I don't worry about what you are going to do."

"You'd better worry," snarled Higginson, his hand on the stateroom door. "I've half a mind—"

"What?" demanded Rod, stepping close to him, just as it appeared as if he were going to return into the stateroom.

Higginson went outside into the alleyway. "You'll find out in about fifteen minutes. You poor bone-headed correspondence school detectives."

Moving like a ballet dancer, on the toes of his heel-less shoes, he minced away.

The pair he left behind him looked at each other with expressions that can be imagined.

"I told you what was going to happen," wailed Howard. "Now we're going to be locked up in the brig and turned over to the police. That fellow was mad and he means business."

"I felt sure he must have the stuff on him," sighed Rod. "We pulled a fine bone, all right."

"What's going to happen to us? That's what I want to know."

"That man is a crook, all right," declared Rod. "The fact that he had a gun on board a peaceable passenger ship proves that. And he was ready to shoot. What made him change his mind unless he knew that what I told him about being investigated and shown up if he fired was what would surely happen?"

"All right. He's a crook, but we held him up and went through him and that makes us criminals. He can claim we robbed him, too."

"I'll be surprised if he does a darn' thing."

But Rod was wrong. In less than five minutes the purser knocked at their door. When it had been opened, he entered. He wore a rather sympathetic grin, but what he said was:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but Mr. Higginson has reported that he was assaulted and searched and a thousand dollars taken from him in this stateroom. Therefore, it is my duty to place you under arrest."

CHAPTER XXIV.

RE-ARRESTED.

A GAIN." sighed Rod.

"It's a deuced serious situation you chaps are in," declared the purser taking a seat. "This robbery charge means prison if it is proved. Of course, you found nothing on him."

"Not a darn' thing."

"You see! I warned you."

"He pulled a gun on us. Is there a law against passengers being armed on board a ship?"

"Why, yes, it is against the regulations."

"Here's the gun. I took it from him."

The purser looked grave. "You shouldn't have done that. Now he can claim he never had it; that it is your gun. Nobody but you saw him draw it, and you are charged with a crime."

The boys exhibited their discouragement and apprehension.

"The worst of it is that neither the captain nor myself can come out and testify in your behalf because we cannot admit that we knew of your intent. It would cost us our jobs."

"Isn't there some quiet way you can let the judge know about it?" asked Howard, most anxiously.

"We must take it up with the management of the company when we reach port. Of course, your financial responsibility will help you with the robbery charge. But you are in a fix."

"Are you going to put us in the brig?"

"No. I'll just station a steward in the alley. But don't try to come out. We

cannot have this man reporting us as lax in our duty."

He shook hands warmly with them and left them alone.

"My God, what are we going to do?" groaned Howard.

"Let's go to bed. Maybe we can sleep."

"A fat chance. When the news of this gets back to Kansas City it will break my poor old mother's heart." Howard was much depressed.

"Brace up," encouraged Rod, who felt nearly as badly. "The voyage isn't over yet. But do you know this is the third time I've been under arrest in six days. It must be a record."

"You can have it. I don't want it."

Being young and healthy, and having the optimism of youth to buoy them they eventually fell asleep.

When Gertrude was undressing that night her mother turned over in her bunk and surprised her by being affable.

"Where were you all evening?" she demanded.

"On deck most of the time."

"Alone."

"No, mother. I was talking to Mr. McGarry."

"Really. Not Mr. Campbell?"

"I didn't see Mr. Campbell all evening."

Then her mother gave her a big surprise.

"Well, Mr. McGarry seems a nice sort of young man. He is a bit awkward and is apt to be misunderstood, but I am sure his heart is in the right place. Some of these young Westerners are splendid, don't you think?"

Gertrude gazed at her in astonishment.

"Mother, what's come over you. Why this afternoon you dragged me away from him and you have been expressing disagreeable opinions of him during the entire voyage."

"Oh, well, one has a right to a change of opinion."

"He must have been talking with you. He is a most interesting talker. I am sure anybody who knew him would like him." She said it all in one breath.

"No-o," admitted Mrs. Thomas. "I haven't been talking to him, but I was

watching him at dinner and it rather struck me then that he was the real man of the two. I don't believe I like Mr. Campbell, after all."

"I give you credit, mother," declared Gertrude warmly. "There is no comparison whatever between them. Mr. McGarry is big, he has a fine mind and wonderful ideas. He is going to make something of himself. Mr. Campbell is amusing, but you have a feeling he is not deep like Mr. McGarry."

"Your mother may be credited with powers of observation," Mrs. Thomas observed. "Now go to sleep, my dear."

She had learned a great deal from Gertrude's outburst of enthusiasm. When a girl talks about a man being deep, and wonderful, and owning big ideas, she is either in love with him or is very near to it.

Mrs. Thomas shuddered at the thought that she had tried to awaken that sort of feeling for Mr. Campbell. The reason for her satisfaction was easy to explain. She had been chatting with the captain during the latter part of the evening and the commander, in a burst of confidence, had told her of the radiograms which explained the real financial rating of Rod and Howard.

Finding things going in a proper manner toward a desired end, Mrs. Thomas saw no reason for interference. She knew her daughter well enough not to share her information with her. She slept well that night for the first time since the radio announcing the Thomas debacle.

Breakfast was served the boys by a grinning steward who had been informed of their predicament, but did not take it seriously.

"If you'll pardon me for saying so, gents," he remarked. "You can get into more pickles than any young chaps I've ever served in me thirty years at sea. Might I arsk what you been up to this time?"

"You might arsk," mimicked Howard, "but I'll be hanged if I tell you. You look to me like a gossip."

"Me, sir. I'm silent like the blooming grave. I heard you had a fight with this Mr. Higginson. It's too bad, and him such a friend."

"He was no friend of mine," growled Rod.

"But he was a frequent visitor to your cabin?"

"He was not. He was never here before."

"Don't say that, sir! With my own eyes, I saw him a coming out of here night before last."

"Wait a minute, say that again." You saw him coming out of here night before last?"

"Aye, sir. And the stewardess was standing with me at the time. I thought you was at home."

"That'll be all, steward,"

As soon as he had gone, Rod turned to Campbell: "You heard that."

"You bet. That was the time he hid the earrings."

"A ray of hope. I don't think we are going to go to jail after all."

"We're in jail now. A prison cell is as big as this. And it's a lovely morning. I'd like to walk the deck with Miss Thomas. You stole a march on me yesterday, but I bet I can cut you out quickly enough."

Rod smiled in a self-satisfied manner for him. "You know, I think Miss Thomas does like me in spite of all the things you told me were wrong about me. I don't believe you can cut me out."

"You watch me work. I never tried for a girl yet and got thrown down. Just let me get loose from this dungeon and I'll show you a cold Boston beauty getting melted."

"Don't talk about her like that, please."

"You are hard hit," laughed Howard. "But you know I do not mean any disrespect. She is a wonderful girl. Let's get out of this."

That was easier said than done. Any effort on their part to break out would simply result in their being confined in less pleasant quarters. So they chafed and chattered and got on each other's nerves and were about ready to quarrel violently when the purser arrived, just before lunch time, escorting the captain and no less a person than Higginson.

The commander wore his most severe and commanding manner.

"The outrage you young men committed on the person of one of the passengers last night," he declared, "would justify you

being committed to prison. But Mr. Higginson has withdrawn the charge of stealing a thousand dollars from him, because he found that he had left it in his stateroom instead of carrying it upon his person as he supposed.

"Hi; ho, hum!" muttered Howard ironically.

"He has also taken into consideration your youth and indiscretion, and I have explained to him your financial responsibility. Therefore, he has been generous enough to ask me not to press the charges and to release you from your confinement. It is on condition that you apologize to him in this room where the outrage has been committed."

"Well, that's darn' decent," exclaimed Howard. "Certainly we'll apologize. We thought he had the Potter-Dunlap swag on him and he didn't have it. Therefore, we were wrong. How's that?"

"It will do," said Higginson, stepping inside the stateroom and leaning against the wall. "But I would also like to hear from Mr. McGarry."

"You are entitled to an apology," said Rod. "I am willing to say I am sorry that we subjected you to—" He broke off, suddenly darted forward, pined Higginson against the wall and seized his right hand.

"Here, here," exclaimed the captain. "Are you crazy? Let that man go."

Higginson was fighting desperately, but he was no match for the powerful farmer.

Rod twisted his arm and pried out of his hand a white object. It was a handkerchief rolled about as big as a tennis ball, and it was hard.

"I accuse this man of stealing the Potter-Dunlap jewels," he exclaimed. "I think I have them."

He untied the handkerchief and emptied upon the berth a glittering pile of rings, a necklace, and pendants. Higginson grew very pale, said nothing, but his eyes shot forth sparks of venom.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed the captain.

The purser grasped Higginson's arm.

"I won't try to get away," he said. "Where could I go?"

"Rod, I'll never call you slow again," exclaimed Howard. "How on earth did you know what was in the handkerchief?"

Rod was smiling with satisfaction and joy. "I did some quick thinking. I'll tell you how I worked it out.

"In the first place, when we didn't find the jewels last night, I was still convinced that he had them. He pulled a gun to defend himself and he changed his mind. You remember he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief when he decided not to shoot, and then I took the gun away.

"Being a crook, and having us in this kind of a position, he was wonderfully fixed to get off the ship with the gems. He had been searched once, the captain would not subject him to the indignity of a second search. We were the logical suspects. So why should he be generous and try to get us released, and withdraw the charge of stealing a thousand dollars from him? It wasn't reasonable.

"Well, the reason was that he had to get into this stateroom again, because he left the jewels here last night. I saw him palm a card in the smoke room a few days ago and I knew how quick he was. When he came into the stateroom to receive his apologies from us he backed up against that wall where the overcoats are hanging.

"I saw one of his hands go behind him, and I took a chance he had taken back the jewels. He dropped them into the outside pocket of an overcoat last night, after wiping his forehead with the handkerchief. He had just taken the handkerchief out of the pocket when I pinned his hand.

"The stunt seemed safe enough to him. He had us imprisoned last night and he knew we wouldn't be apt to need the overcoats while we were in the stateroom.

"So he figured out this grandstand play to-day. He felt that his generosity toward us would square him with ourselves and the captain, and, if I hadn't been absolutely convinced from the first that he was a crook, he probably would have got away with the whole thing.

"You are too damn' smart," snarled Higginson. "But you can't pin the train robbery on me."

"I expect we'll be able to do that when we get you back to America and let the railroad detectives look you over."

"Take this man to the brig and see that he communicates with nobody," said the captain. He held out his hand to Rod.

"Mr. McGarry, I want to congratulate you, both on your logic and your pluck. Some men might have worked out things as you did, but few would have had the courage to follow up their theories with direct action. You have got me out of a predicament. I may add that Mrs. Potter-Dunlap has offered a reward of five thousand dollars for the safe return of her gems, but you naturally will not want to claim it because you don't need it."

"Mr. Campbell is entitled to the reward," declared Rod quickly. "It was he who succeeded in winning the friendship of Higginson and inducing him to come to the stateroom. He needs it, he has been suspected, and subjected to annoyance, and I want him to have it."

"Then I'll see that he gets it," declared the skipper. "For the third time I release you from arrest. See you at lunch."

"Five thousand dollars' reward!" exclaimed Howard. "Good Lord, Rod, that's a fortune to me. It 'll let me get a start."

"I hope so, but not the way you have been living in the past."

"That's all over. I'm modeling myself on you from now on. Here I justified myself for commandeering a job with you on the grounds that you needed somebody to take care of you, and instead you have been taking care of me."

"Of course you will lose caste with Mrs. Potter-Dunlap for accepting a reward."

"I should worry about social standing. I'm going to forget that stuff and buckle down. You know, Rod, I had some foolish ideas of picking up a rich wife on this voyage, but that was all bunk. I'm not as bad as that. I think my affection for Gertrude Thomas has made a different man of me. Do you think she would have me?"

"I certainly hope not."

"Are you seriously hoping to marry her?"

"If I don't I'll never marry anybody else."

"Well, isn't that tough, that we both should be gone on the same girl. There's one decent thing I can do, give you the first chance. I'll stand aside until she has thrown you down. You're a great fellow, Rod, but I don't see how she could fall in love with you. I'm not taking much of a chance after all; don't give me too much credit."

"I suppose you are right," Rod sighed. "A few hours in the moonlight mustn't be taken too seriously. And I don't believe I'll ever have the nerve to propose to her."

"Want me to ask her for you?"

"You are thinking of John Alden and Priscilla. Nothing doing. I don't trust you enough in a case like this."

The bugle for the luncheon stopped the discussion and sent them to the dining saloon.

CHAPTER XXV.

SENTENCED FOR LIFE.

IT didn't take long for the news to spread over the Durania that the missing jewels had been restored to Mrs. Potter-Dunlap, and that the thief had been run down and captured by those clever young men, Messrs. Campbell and McGarry. Mrs. Potter-Dunlap lost a good deal of her enthusiasm when she found that she had to pay a reward, and she handed her check to Howard in the manner in which she would have tipped a waiter.

The news that Howard had accepted a reward had the effect upon his social standing on board that Rod had predicted, but for once this meant nothing in his life. He sought out Gertrude quite jubilantly, but he found her rather cold.

"I think it was very clever of you to recover the gems," she said, "but didn't Mr. McGarry help you a lot?"

"I should say he did. Rod was the whole works when it came to uncovering this crook, Higginson."

"You are going to share the reward with him, are you not?"

"Well, the fact is, that he won't take it."

"Why not?"

"Well, the fact is that Rod wants me to have it all."

"Mr. Campbell," she said, looking at him squarely with her overpowering dark eyes. "I don't understand you. This poor young man who is traveling with you does most of the work according to your own admission, and you, who do not need it, accept a reward. That is surprising enough. But it certainly is your duty to divide it with him under the circumstances."

"You don't understand the circumstances," Howard declared in great embarrassment. "Honestly, it's perfectly all right with him."

"You pay him a salary and he must be content with that. Any commissions such as this go to you, is that your agreement?"

The bitterness of her tone penetrated his harmless egotism, and hurt him. So he blurted out the truth.

"I don't pay him any salary. The truth is that I have been sailing under false colors on board. Rod is retiring and modest and he hates attentions. Out West he is quite famous because he suddenly and romantically came into a big pot of money.

"I started out as his secretary, and he didn't like appearing as a millionaire, so he pushed me into the limelight and became my 'secretary.' Of course, nobody knew anything about either of us on this ship, so it didn't matter, but in case any of the crazy stories in the papers about him had been seen by some of the passengers he didn't want to be known as that McGarry."

"I see," said Gertrude quietly. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Campbell. Now I know why you took the reward. You were quite right. Will you excuse me now, I must look up mother."

She left him abruptly and he looked after her with bitterness. So that was the kind of a girl she was. When she found he was a poor man she didn't want to talk to him any longer. Well, there were others, and at least he had a consolation prize of five thousand dollars.

Of course he misjudged Gertrude. A certain situation she had been constructing in her mind would have to be rebuilt. And she did want to see her mother. Now she

understood why Mrs. Thomas had suddenly and inexplicably begun to admire McGarry. She had learned that he was the millionaire instead of Campbell. And Gertrude had liked Rod, more than liked him. She hated to admit how much she liked him.

Last night, in the moonlight, she had rebuked him for his lack of ambition and talked about the necessity of work. How he must have laughed at her beneath his mask of a member of the working classes. She had told him all about her father's failure and her own modest ambitions.

If he should propose to her now she could not accept him; he might think it was his money she wanted, because Campbell would surely tell him what he had confessed to her. And it was known on board. Her mother knew about it. There was only one thing to do, keep away from him until the ship docked. That would be to-morrow.

She was angry with her mother; Mrs. Thomas was ready to throw her into the arms of anybody who could relieve her own impending financial distress. Until she heard that Rod was wealthy she had considered him as a contemptible, ill-bred person. And in a few minutes she was willing to encourage her daughter to entrap that person into a marriage.

Why she would be as unprincipled as her mother if she encouraged Rod now. She was a bankrupt's daughter. A wealthy marriage would be a boon to her. He might not suspect her now of mercenary motives, but later he might. She shivered inside herself at the thought that Rod could ever think such things of her. And to assure herself of his continued good opinion she would not see him any more. On this she was resolved.

The last night on board ship was to be celebrated by a grand ball. In addition to the flags, the colored lights and the orchestra which had participated at the first dismal affair, the chief steward has set up tables on deck for a buffet supper. The passengers by this time were on excellent terms. Most of the young women had made the acquaintance of all the young men. The matrons were unbending, the greybeards sufficiently familiar with all, to essay the dance.

At the first dancing party quiet and unassuming frocks were the rule. To-night the ladies brought out the darlings of their wardrobes. Mrs. Potter-Dunlap had arrayed herself in all the restored treasures, expecting that she would create a sensation and realizing her expectation.

Mrs. Thomas felt called upon to don one of her prettiest and most expensive frocks, and when Gertrude pleaded a headache and said she would spend the evening in her stateroom, she laid out for her a beautiful dress of red and gold and exercised her parental authority to compel her to don it and accompany her in to dinner.

Gertrude was a soul stirring and utterly ravishing picture when she entered the dining room in that creation. Howard Campbell forgot the consolation of the check for five thousand dollars, and his private views of her meanness of spirit.

Rod gazed with all his eyes, as an art lover would for the first time upon Raphael's Sistine Madonna in its chamber in the Dresden Gallery. Heads turned and twisted, and the hum of conversation stilled for a moment.

The girl was apparently unconscious of the sensation she had created. She followed her mother docilely and sank meekly into her chair at the captain's table.

Her regalness made Rod realize that he was present at the feast without his wedding garment. His brown suit was conspicuous in a room filled with men and women in evening dress. He promised himself to remain far from the part of the ship where the ball was to occur.

Yet he felt a sense of pride in the beauty and splendor of the girl he adored, as if he were somehow sharing her triumph. Perhaps he would not go too far away. By standing on the outer rim of the crowd he could see her now and then in the whirl of the dance.

Dinner that night was a long and elaborate affair, containing many special dishes not ordinarily served. Much wine was being drunk in the dining room. The passengers were in a festive mood.

As quickly as he could manage it, Rod left Howard half way through his dinner, and made an inconspicuous exit; not so in-

conspicuous, however, that Gertrude did not see him depart. Poor boy, she thought, he probably felt self-conscious because he had no evening clothes. He needn't, because he was the most attractive man in the room.

When dinner was finally over she encountered Howard, who had planted himself where he could not very well be overlooked in the upper hallway.

"May I have the pleasure of a dance, this evening?" he demanded. Howard was perfectly willing to be seen on the floor with the belle of the ball even if they could never be anything to each other.

"Of course, Mr. Campbell," she responded with a friendly smile, "and please hunt up Mr. McGarry and tell him I have saved two dances for him, and he is to come for them, positively. I don't care if he is wearing a brown suit."

"I'll deliver your message," Howard declared, "and he'll come for them if I have to drag him out by the feet. He's probably planning to hide behind the smokestack for the entire evening."

"See that he doesn't."

Howard drew Gertrude out for the first dance and the deck was quickly filled with foxtrotting couples. When he led her back to her mother she was surrounded by young men including several of the ship's officers. Howard went in search of Rod.

He found him in the smoking room drinking an after dinner cup of coffee.

"I guess you are the white haired boy all right," Howard began. "She says she doesn't care if you do look like a bum, she is saving two dances for you and you are to report and find out when they are."

"Good Lord, man, I can't push through that crowd and get out on that floor dressed the way I am."

"If you love the girl you ought to be willing to put up with a little embarrassment. She'll probably suffer worse than you do because she can see you and you can't see yourself."

"It's fine of her, isn't it?"

"She's not a bad sort, but mercenary. You ought to see how quick she turned me down when she found I didn't have any money."

"I won't have you saying things like that about Miss Thomas. Who told her you didn't have any money?"

"I did. She twitted me with taking the reward. Said I ought to split it with you, and insinuated I was mean. So I explained that I was only your paid companion and you had all the coin."

"Confound you, why did you make such an explanation without getting my permission."

"I didn't give a darn about your permission."

"You're fired."

"I don't give a darn about that. I've got five thousand dollars, and that will pay my passage home, anyway."

"Of course, you are not fired," declared Rod, recovering his usual good nature. "But I didn't want her to know that I had money. I wanted to win her for myself alone."

"Rubbish! You read that in a book. It's easier to win them with your coin."

"You are bitter and cynical because you know you've lost her. You know in your heart that Miss Thomas is not that kind of a girl at all."

"I suppose you are right," admitted Howard with a sickly smile. "Go claim your dances before the purser and the first officer get them."

Rod left him and started for the ball. He found Gertrude finishing a dance. She held out her hand to him and announced:

"My next dance belongs to Mr. McGarry."

The crowd scattered and she was left alone with Rod.

"Did you think I was very bold because I put you down for two dances without your asking me?" she demanded.

"You were sorry for me because I didn't have any evening clothes with me. That's why you did it. And I don't know how to dance."

"Then we'll sit this dance out," she declared.

"Let's move out of the crowd. I feel very conspicuous."

The girl wrapped a scarf around her and they crossed through the main hallway to the opposite deck, which was deserted.

"Miss Thomas," Rod said as soon as they had seated themselves in convenient deck chairs. "Will you marry me?"

"No, I won't!"

"I didn't suppose you would, but I felt if I didn't ask you at once I'd never get courage enough to do it."

"It's no way to propose to a girl, without any preliminaries. Why, you startled me!"

"I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you ask me last night?" demanded Gertrude, almost resentfully.

"Would you have accepted me last night?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I was in a sort of a yielding mood."

"Then you must love me as much as you did then. I think you had better reconsider."

"Last night," she said, "you were a poor young secretary and I was going to be a teacher, or a stenographer, or a librarian, or something. Now you're a wealthy man and I can't marry for money."

"I'll choke Howard Campbell when I get my hands on him."

"You needn't. My mother knew about it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself masquerading around like a poor pathetic thing. I was sorry for you."

"Be sorry for me now."

"I'm sorry for myself."

"I think you do love me a little."

"I am not going to marry a man for his money. I could never look you in the eye."

"You don't care anything about my money, do you?"

"I most certainly do not."

"Then we are engaged to be married."

"We are not. You can't get engaged to me without my consent. I should think, with all your money, you could have bought a suit of evening clothes."

"You aren't going to change the subject. We are engaged and I'm going to kiss you."

"Don't you dare! I'll scratch."

Rod took her two hands in one big paw, turned up her chin with the other, and kissed her. She had tried to turn her head, but when she felt his lips she kissed him back.

"You darling!" he murmured, intoxicated with his first kiss.

She was half crying and half laughing.

"You big brute. You made me kiss you."

"And I'll make you marry me."

"I suppose so," she assented.

He kissed her again.

"I don't care anything about Europe," he said. "I'll get passage back on the same boat with you and your mother. When we get to Boston I'll go to your father and see if we can't set his factory on its feet

again. You said I ought to be in some useful business, and what is more useful than making shoes?"

"But you ought to see Europe," she protested. "You have been looking forward to it for so long."

"I'll save it for our honeymoon."

"But Mr. Campbell will be so disappointed."

Rod laughed. "I'm going to make a shoe salesman out of Howard. I bet he'll be good at it."

THE END



MIRA THE BULKIEST YET

WHEN the blinking stars above
Work all night till sun-up
In the interest of Love,
How they must feel done up.

Mira is the queen of them
Coming debutantish,
And, from what I've seen of them,
She is elephantish.

Thirty million times the size
Of the earth is this 'un;
Grab your mind, and shut your eyes,
Hold your breath and listen.

Man up there must be so vast
Viewing him is dreary;
When he sneezes, what a blast—
Eyes like old Lake Erie.

When he smiles from ear to ear
The crevices must race back,
And yet it takes about a year
For him to get his face back.

We can, with the naked eye,
Rarely get a glimpse of her.
Think how huge her by and by,
Contemplate the shrimps of her.

Think of Mira if you can
Think of things so biggish;
Here's a cure for little man
When he's feeling priggish.

Surest remedy you've read
(No one yet has died of it)—
For that swelling of the head
Try big stars inside of it.

James S. Ryan.



Charlie Chong, A.M.

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

"I REGRET, esteemed Bong Lee, that we have no place upon the *Chung Mei Bo* worthy of your scholarly attainments," said Charlie Chong, editor of that progressive San Francisco Chinese daily.

He was addressing a tall, cadaverous man of his own race, a man whose withered cheeks and fishy eye told of ill-filled rice bowls and no pork. A former schoolmaster he was, whose knowledge had stagnated since the coming of Western learning and public schools to Chinatown.

"In fact," the young editor went on, "only yesterday the same question was asked by no less than a necromancer from the Temple, the distinguished Ho Si Bing—"

"That worm!" The scholar leaped from the chair in which he had sat so stiffly. "That turtle's son! Thus would he take the rice from my very lips. That scum of foul gutters—"

"Be calm, worthy Bong Lee," Charlie broke in with soothing unction; "be calm."

"I will; that maggot shall not excite me."

And illustrating his words by acts, he dashed the tea bowl from which he had been drinking to the floor, ground its fragments beneath an outraged heel, and glared wildly about him.

"If I but had that serpent here—thus would I crush him," and he gestured dramatically to the fragments from which but a moment before he had sipped the Dew of Heaven so gratefully.

"Yes—yes—I understand," the youthful editor placated. "Of course if there is an opening here, I shall see that—"

Bong Lee's flushed cheeks subsided to their usual tone of secondhand ivory.

"I must trouble you no more with even the mention of that eel's name," the teacher spoke with forced calm. "Another time we will talk of affairs. *Ho hang la.*"

Bong Lee walked stiffly to the door, stopped to bow low, and then disappeared down the creaking stairs.

"*Ho hang la*—may you walk well," echoed the young man.

Charlie Chong returned the gaze of satisfied eyes upon the monthly statement of the circulation manager that had intrigued his attention before the coming of the schoolmaster. His long, skinny legs were wrapped in contented knots about his chair rungs as he perused the document. Success was written in those tabulated columns. It was as though the bright button of the third degree of scholarship—the *summa cum laude* of the Chinese—had been expressed in figures. Happily he stroked a pointed chin and laid aside his purely professional glasses to appraise more clearly those encouraging figures.

The circulation of the *Chung Mei Bo*, or Chinese *American News*, was growing rapidly. Each morning the press lumbered longer and the string of slant-eyed newsboys in the alley became more serpentine, like a restless, growing dragon lashing an impatient tail as it waited for its daily ration of newsprint. Again, like a growing dragon, it demanded more food daily, as the figures before the editor plainly showed.

And as he untwined the thin legs to rest them upon the table top before him, Charlie Chong reviewed the past—a past written by two scurrying years that had brought him from the post of a highly mobile check boy for the Associated Press to the editor's chair of the *Chung Mei Bo*. Then flitted before him a picture of Tze Chan, the flowerlike daughter of his employer, the austere Tze Mong. The best traditions of American fiction were blossoming before him, he told himself. The poor but bright young man with a large idea was reaping phenomenal results through nimble wits and boundless energy. And as the picture of the girl came clearer in his mind he gauged her daintiness.

She, like himself, was not of the golden age, but modern, with hair bobbed most bewitchingly, setting off a pert face, frankly rouged in the manner of the day. Instead of trousers, such as his mother wore, she was beskirted daintily, her slender legs adorned with creamy hosiery, almost as creamy as her skin, reflected Charlie Chong, with just the rose-tint of a flush pinking his high cheek bones.

He had just resolved that they would be married according to the Western rite, when Tze Mong entered, bearing a tabulation somewhat like that which Charlie had been perusing so happily. Short and fat was the publisher with buttonlike nose and restless eyes that looked out from beneath racially heavy lids, although they sought to see everything.

"I am sorry, Chong Fook Ho," the owner began in his musical Cantonese, addressing the youth by his formal Chinese name rather than the hybrid cognomen adopted during Chong's dip into American journalism. "I am deeply sorry, but I am afraid that we shall have to make a change."

Castles in Cathay that had been mounting skyward in the young man's mind slumped noiselessly to the earth. He had heard phrases like these before, and they invariably presaged summary dismissal.

"But," Charlie protested with a gesture toward the circulation statement, "we have never sold so many papers. Never was the *Chung Mei Bo* so widely read."

"Never did we use so much white paper," countered Tze Mong, a pudgy forefinger referring to figures upon his own statement. "Never was there so little advertising. Our business men say they get no results from the *Chung Mei Bo* since we adopted the policy of modernity. Our books show losses instead of gains."

"They should get even greater results with increased circulation," the young man argued.

"According to the same reasoning we should see enhanced profits, but my book-keeper presents me with a statement showing a loss."

"What reason do these merchants give for withdrawing their advertisements?"

"I have just come from an interview with Mock Dong, the provisioner," the elder man responded. "For the past week he has advertised with us generously, setting forth the merits of a large shipment of bird nests and shark fins. Not a response did he receive. Yesterday he announced these delicacies in one of our more conservative competitors and has virtually sold out his stock. We shall have to drop

this modern policy of ours. We shall have to make a change."

"When?" The young man's slender legs gripped his chair more firmly.

"We will wait one moon. You should be able to find another place by then," said Tze Mong gravely, almost sorrowfully, for he liked Charlie Chong and knew that his flowerlike daughter, Tze Chan, had cast appraising eyes upon him.

With ceremonious bow the publisher withdrew, and the slender, youthful legs were unwound with a snap as Charlie Chong bestirred himself with the thought that but one month remained in which to save the *Chung Mei Bo* to modernity and at the same time rescue his own job from swiftly impending dissolution.

"There must be a change," was his reflection, as he winged his way down Grant Avenue, Chinatown's main thoroughfare. Thus far did he agree with his employer, but that there should be a shift of personnel in the editor's chair was a decision with which he disagreed violently.

His first call was upon the revered Ho Si Bing, necromancer in the Temple, a seared and sallow ancient with skull-like face and hands that were mere claws. The thaumaturgy Ho practiced might be brummagem, but his knowledge of men and affairs in Chinatown was based upon the wisdom of life. It was to this wisdom that Charlie Chong appealed when he outlined his dilemma.

"One does not need to conjure the spirits of the wind and water to find an answer," the sage replied. "Your paper is of the new world, your advertisers and their goods are of the old. Do you yourself eat bird nest soup or pay high prices for shark fins?"

"Roast beef medium or a good steak," declared the youth.

Ho's thin hands executed a gesture like a man suddenly opening a fan. The question and answer had been sufficient for him.

"What would be your advice?"

"Return to the ways of your fathers." Then, with a sly glance from yellowed eyes: "I may be of some aid to you upon the *Chung Mei Bo*, if you could find a place for me. The recompense for necromancy has dwindled sadly."

Charlie Chong reached into his pocket to draw forth an emaciated roll of bills, but the aged prophet stayed him.

"My words to you are without charge," he said, "but I trust that you will leave to his own swinish devices that seed of vermin known as Bong Lee. He is the unworthy son of a turtle, and some day this hand will strike him down—no more to rise."

He held up a palsied talon, his blurred eyes glaring defiantly as he continued to mutter imprecations upon the head of the venerable schoolmaster.

"But he is my friend," protested Charlie loyally.

"A friend he may be—but pay no attention to his words," conceded Ho. "He exudes ignorance in clouds like a marsh at sundown."

Despite this warning, the young man next hid himself to the poor home of the scholar, there to state his problem, for Ho Si Bing's solution did not meet with his approval.

"I have just come from the Temple," he admitted diffidently, when he had concluded.

"Shun the mockery of magic," warned the gaunt Bong jealousy, "especially when conjured by that pious old fraud, Ho—"

"But what is your solution, worthy sir?"

"It is manifest," retorted the scholar. "You must either change the policy of your paper or your advertisers. Your advertisers are changing themselves. Therefore you must seek business that befits this ultra-modernity. Our young people are following the mode of the *fan quai*—the foreign devils—why not turn to the white men for trade? You give him yours. Look at your readers—can the dealer in shark fins, bird nests and dried lizards sell to them? Where did you get that straw hat?"

"Why—er—Jones & Company."

Bong Lee's gesture, like that of Ho Si Bing, was that of a man opening a fan with a swift snap. The question and answer had closed all doors to argument.

Fairly aflame with the idea that the spark of Bong Lee's logic had ignited, Charlie Chong strode swiftly to the offices of the

Chung Mei Bo. Bursting into the rabbit hutch its owner reserved for his own privacy, he informed his august employer that the lean days were at an end and that he, Charlie Chong, was prepared to fill the hollow advertising columns and keep the paper safe in the ranks of modernity.

"I will continue to look after the editorial end," he concluded, "and at the same time—"

"If you do, you will be more wonderful than the Temple of Heaven," interrupted the publisher with scarce a twinkle in his keen eyes and then airing a morsel of foreign learning of which he felt justly proud: "Compared to the plan you propose, the labors of the somewhat celebrated Her Ku Lees will shrink to babe's play. If Ah Moy, the goddess of luck, smiles upon you, not only will you have my admiration, but fifteen per cent of the business gained."

"Which is more welcome than incense before the tablets of the departed or the harmony of rhetoric in the ears of the living," replied Charlie Chong with a seriousness that was not entirely in keeping with the boyish legs and rounded cheek. Then with that native caniness that is baffling to Jew and Parsee, Armenian and Connecticut Yankee "Fifteen per cent is quite all right up to the first thousand dollars of new business, but after that—"

"After that—twenty-five per cent," broke in Tze Mong, glowing with generosity, for the picture Charlie Chong had held before him was far less real than the fables of the Dragon god.

"That is—up to five thousand," the young man suggested, "and after that—"

"After that—fifty per cent," the publisher spoke recklessly, like one who had chosen all ten winning spots in the Sun Kung lottery and is possessed of great and sudden wealth. "After that—fifty per cent—I shall not be niggardly."

"Not fifty per cent," Charlie knew the costs of publication. "There would be no silver for you at that and business in which both members of the deal do not profit breeds bad blood and ruin, says the sage of Shantung."

Tze Mong's narrow eyes appraised the young man shrewdly. Perhaps some wild

streak of luck would favor this sprightly youth.

"Thirty per cent," he said hastily.

And thus was the business arranged.

Charlie Chong put in the next few mornings making a careful study of applying practically the wisdom of Bong Lee. He haunted the great department stores and watched the purchases of Chinese customers. He studied the advertisements of the English language papers and mapped similar announcements in his own tongue.

"One week has gone and I have been called upon for no percentages," Tze Mong goaded one day when Charlie was finishing the draft of a page advertisement that he had prepared to submit to a leading department store.

"Be patient, worthy Tze Mong," he replied, "I shall have good news before the time for evening rice."

Charlie Chong had dressed with meticulous care to invade the citadel of John Harvey, advertising manager for Jones & Co. The presentation of his sample page announcement had been rehearsed and edited with the care candidates use in preparing their speeches of acceptance. It was with palpitating heart that he was ushered into Harvey's presence to launch a barrage of words, each an argument why Jones & Co. should be represented in the Chinese press.

"I am sorry," John Harvey said when Charlie Chong had concluded, "your proposition sounds interesting, but our advertising budget is made out a year in advance and even our emergency fund has been expended. Come back, say about September 1, when we are looking after next year's business and I shall be glad to talk to you."

With a cheerful "Good morning," he terminated the interview, and Charlie Chong found himself upon the rug outside the private office, utterly crushed. He had conjured a vision of returning to Tze Mong with an adipose contract and demanding fifteen per cent. And now—one-fourth of his precious month had fled to the cavernous past. In three more weeks there would be a change in the editor's chair at the *Chung Mei Bo*.

Next he hurried to another department store. The advertising manager was in

Memphis attending a convention of the Lions' Club and no new business would be undertaken until his return. At a third store, it developed that the head of the department had Rotary tendencies that had called him away and the assistant in charge always allowed his chief to pass upon contracts.

The mobile legs that were Charlie Chong's sagged wearily as he crossed Pine Street into Chinatown. The nimble brain was fagged as he slumped into his chair to take up his writing brush and begin the day's editorial duties. The balloon of his hope had burst like a pin-pricked toy and he plumbed the nadir of disillusionment. The trivial gossip of his people cloyed as he wrote its details and the creaking stairs, heralding the coming of a visitor, pierced grateful ears.

He raised jaundiced eyes to meet the hollow orbs of Bong Lee, his former schoolmaster. It was this same Bong Lee whose flaw-filled logic had failed to see the possibility of exhausted advertising appropriations and conventions of Lions and Rotarians.

"I have good news for you," the cadaverous scholar announced, after he had inquired if his young friend continued to walk well.

"Speak without hesitancy, worthy Bong," said Charlie, "it will be the first to fall upon my ear to-day."

Bong Lee glanced around as though he feared some jealous listener might be concealed within the walls, and then in an awe-stricken whisper that rattled hoarsely:

"The five and ten cent stores are going to open a branch on Sutter Street next Saturday."

Poised for a moment upon hope's high peaks, Charlie Chong slumped back into his chair, disconsolate.

"A news item, perhaps, but—" He made a note or two in the running hand of the Chinese script. "Their advertising manager is probably a Kiwanian and is attending a convention in Duluth."

"A thousand pardons, but I do not understand." Bong's bony brow wrinkled.

"Their advertising appropriation probably is exhausted completely," the young man went on in utter dejection.

"The royal highway of pessimism leads straight to the kingdom of failure," quoted Bong Lee from one of the minor sages of the Chow dynasty, "and what is that *fan quai* saw? If at first you do not succeed—"

"That's just what I am going to do," cried Charlie Chong, untwining his legs from his chair rungs and leaping to his feet. "You say that you have a flare for letters—try your hand at those 'Chinatown Chat-terings'—neighborhood gossip—make it zippy, but at the same time avoid libel."

"I have several things that I would like to print about that wretched old fraud, Ho Si Bing—" Bong Lee began, a delighted smile lighting up the cavernous depths of his eyes. "That turtle's son has been imposing too long upon—"

"Keep your private fights out of the paper, learned sir," broke in the young editor, "I have enough irate subscribers to meet without taking on any ancient feuds. Besides, Ho Si Bing is a friend of mine."

Gathering up the rejected advertisement he had prepared for Jones & Co., Charlie Chong hurried to the office of Harry Estcourt, publicity manager for the chain stores. Admitted to the presence of that important personage he spread the page of drafted Chinese characters upon a wide desk top.

"What is it?" Estcourt asked with a grin. "Master sheet of to-day's lottery drawing? I never gamble."

Charlie Chong gave no heed to this quip, but launched into the well-rehearsed speech he had prepared for Jones & Co.'s publicity chief. The grin that had wrinkled Estcourt's face relaxed as he listened to the young man's talk. Then his brows knitted in serious attention.

"You are opening a new store on the edge of the Chinese section," Chong said in conclusion. "Our people are steady and thrifty buyers—and always for cash."

"A practical idea on the face of it," Estcourt admitted, as the young man paused for breath. "It might be an experiment worth trying. What's your rate?"

"Two dollars an inch."

"Circulation?"

"Twenty-five thousand in San Francisco and the Bay district. Ten thousand scattered in the country."

"High, but—"

"On contract we might—"

"We never contract until we are sure of results. This is only an experiment. I'll take a page for the Saturday issue, but we must have results if there is to be any more business. I'll have the copy ready for you to-morrow, but you will have to translate it and read proof. Any charge for that?"

"No charge. I'll attend to that myself—personally."

"Thanks—glad to have met you, Mr. Chong—I'll leave the copy with my secretary—remember, we must have results—immediate results—good morning."

Charlie Chong found himself on the rug outside the private office, utterly crushed. Crushed down by full-blossomed joy.

A page at two dollars an inch. The nimble brain needed no abacus to calculate—twenty inches to the column—forty dollars. Eight columns to the page—three hundred and twenty dollars. His fingers were playing in the air as though they were operating the beads of his calculator. Fifteen per cent of three hundred and twenty dollars. Result: Forty-eight—almost twice what Tze Mong paid him for six days of twelve hours each.

He winged his way back to the office to find a note upon his desk saying that his employer had been called to Sacramento upon business, but would be back Saturday morning. Bong Lee was immersed in composing sonorous paragraphs on the comings and goings of Chinatown—a task Charlie Chong was willing he should continue, for he realized that his own labors were only beginning instead of having been brought to fruitful conclusion.

"You spoke words of great wisdom, learned Bong," the young man told his former schoolmaster. "I have an order for a page announcement that will be of great profit to the *Chung Mei Bo*—I am ever your debtor."

"Then let me tell an utterly deceived world the truth about that worm that crawls in our Temple—the wretched Ho Si—"

"No—anything else, worthy Bong, anything—"

"Nothing else really matters," sighed the

schoolmaster as does a child when a toy almost within its reach is snatched away.

With Bong Lee's aid, the paper was sent to press a trifle earlier than usual, and Charlie Chong centered his attention upon his great problem.

"He demands results—immediate results," the young man told himself as he bent his mind to the task, "I must see that he gets them."

From a drawer in his desk he took forth a tiny volume—almost a sacred volume it was to him—his savings account with the Canton bank. It had been conceived with the deposit of one dollar and its total of more than one hundred represented the most painstaking thrift. But Charlie Chong was Chinese and had within his heart that innate love of a gamble where long odds—with the smile of Ah Moy—will reward the player manifold.

Late into the night he labored, studying the advertisements of the Chain stores appearing in one of the English language dailies from which he copied long lists of articles.

The next morning saw him among the first to enter the Canton bank and when he departed, the balance in his favor stood once more at its starting point—one dollar. His next call was at the Temple, where again he sought the venerable Ho Si Bing. To him he confided his plan and a number of the lists of articles he had transcribed the night before. Likewise a portion of Charlie Chong's scanty savings changed hands.

"I shall regard it as an honor to be your commissioner in making these purchases," Ho Si Bing spoke gravely, "and besides I shall buy a few trifles upon my own account. Brothers of my tong will be given lists and urged to aid you in your worthy cause." And then with a covert glance through his heavily lensed glasses: "Will that unspeakable upstart and sty of ignorance, Bong Lee, be a party to this affair?"

"I shall seek his aid," Chong replied honestly, "for he is my friend, but you need not work together."

"See that he keeps from my sight," rasped the aged prophet. "I do not wish to soil these hands with the blood of a turtle."

Ho Si Bing held aloft twin claws, gar-

nished with prodigiously long nails, saved, after the olden manner among his kind, to show that he was not a man who labored.

From the Temple, Chong dashed to the home of Hong Kew, the carpenter, a friend of his father's. Li Muck Pow and even Good Dip, the printer, were enlisted. Nine friends and ninety dollars were deployed along the firing line in the strategic arrangement to stimulate business. His last visit was to the humble abode of Bong Lee.

"For you I will do much, but ask me not to consort with that pious fraud who disgraces the tribe of Ho," declared the scholar when Charlie had unfolded his plan. "I should hate to soil good steel with the green gaul that courses through his veins, but—"

His voice trailed off into narrow chilling imprecations idiomatic to the tongue of Canton.

"Could I avail myself of your immeasurable aid in the office again to-day?" the young editor inquired. "I shall be very busy and your trenchant brush will add much to our poor columns."

Bong Lee forgot his time-honored feud at this chance to write once more for publication. Like many schoolmasters, he nursed literary ambitions and he was only seventy-two.

Charlie Chong found that the copy prepared for him by Harry Estcourt was in the usual style of the American advertising bureau. To translate it literally would produce only a meaningless congeries of words and his heart sank as he realized the result such an effort would bring. Chinatown would first stare incredulously and then burst into toothful smiles—Chinatown never laughed aloud. It had not been done since the Chow dynasty.

And Charlie Chong knew his own people. That is why he threw away his glasses, stripped off his collar and then his coat to labor through the night upon what must be his masterpiece — an advertisement that would appeal to the Chinese and bring results—immediate results.

Two things he kept ever before him, the Chinese love for maxim and racial thrift. When the wisdom of his ancestral land failed to supply sage saw and appealing

aphorism, he borrowed from his adopted tongue and its philosophers. Finished—he studied his effort with applauding eyes—the eyes of a satisfied artist-connoisseur, appreciating his own greatest work. Translated into discordant English, it lost the musical cadences of the Cantonese, but read something in this wise:

A PENNY SAVED IS A PENNY EARNED

—Ben Frank Len

So says a seer whose prophetic eyes must have foreseen the magnificent opening to-day of the

GATE TO A THOUSAND JOYS

Home of
Bargain

Temple of
Thrift

Known to the White Ones as

FIVE AND TEN CENT EMPORIUM

What says the Sage of Shantung—the Heaven sent Kong Fu Tze. Doubtlessly his inspired eye beheld this great event even from the hoary past when he said:

THE PRUDENT MAN MAKES WISE SELECTION

These are the Master's words. Give heed and remember that both He and the Illustrious Ben Frank Len agreed on this:

THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM

Therefore, be wise—be an early bird, a prudent man and make wise selection from this galaxy of bargains:

Tack hammers, 10c. A gift from the gods.
Electric globes, 10c. The light of heaven for a song.

Tin cups, 5c. A prudent purchase—they do not break.

Clothes pins, 10c. (doz.) The thrifty will note this and be wise.

Followed long lists of typical chain store offerings to which Charlie Chong added quaint bits of oriental philosophy. He scanned the pages of a book of popular quotations borrowed from the near-by Chinese Y. M. C. A. and the names of the authors limned in Celestial characters were enough to make more than one celebrated ghost sit up in musty grave with puzzled skull. In addition to Ben Frank Len, there were gems of thought from Pla Tow, Tac Ti Tus, Ir Vin Kob and Koo Ay.

"Each day, each way, we get more better," says the learned Koo Ay," wrote Charlie at the end of the advertisement as a cap sheaf to his shock of harvested phil-

osophy, "so watch the announcements of the Temple of Thrift for further bargains."

Harry Estcourt laughingly scrawled his O. K. upon the page proof, which was more than Greek to him, for Charlie Chong had not seen fit to point out the liberty he had taken with the original text.

Again, with Bong Lee's aid, the paper was put to press and Charlie Chong, with heart high and hopeful, retired in the early hours of the morning confident that time alone separated him from victory. He had asked his quaint be-trousered mother to call him early that he might marshal his aids under the banners of Ho Si Bing and Bong Lee and at the same time keep these warring clans far separated.

But sleep proved like Chan Sha, the Daphne of the Chinese, ever eluding and the first coral rays of a new day were dancing through his down drawn curtain when he finally sank into slumber.

He awoke with a start and glared incredulously at the clock upon the chair beside his bed. It was past noon and— He threw on his clothes to dash into the kitchen where he found his mother preparing a tempting omlette of sprouts and shrimps.

"I must have forgotten to ask you to call me, revered mother," he said with that deference a Chinese always shows his parents. "It is too bad—my carelessness—"

"You told me," she replied with an admiring smile and then like the mothers of all races—of all ages: "You were sleeping so soundly and you have been working so hard of late that—"

"I am sorry," he murmured, as he gulped his food. "I must hurry."

A cumulus of darkening doubt, foreboding fear, gathered over him as the spindling legs coursed down Sacramento Street to Grant Avenue and then turned south toward the American section of the city. The five and ten cent store opened at nine o'clock and Charlie Chong had intended to superintend the activities of Ho Si Bing, Bong Lee and their entourages.

Now—the morning was gone and afternoon at hand. In half an hour he would be due to report at the *Chung Mei Bo*. His employer would be at hand, for Tze Mong had planned to be at his own desk by noon.

The young man's steps quickened.

Then flashed the thought of the carnage that might ensue if Ho Si Bing and Bong Lee met in the store, each at the head of rival cohorts. The vision spurred him, almost to a run.

As he turned the corner at Sutter Street and Grant Avenue, his speeding feet were shocked to immobility. Before the doors of the five and ten cent store—halfway up the block—a veritable mob was milling.

From the vortex of the swirling mass came shouts, screams, piercing Chinese oaths—curses that start where the Anglo-Saxon leaves off and mount in geometrical proportion until each word is soul searing.

But under the sharp, distinguishable cries that reached his ears, loomed a sullen major tone—the dull roar of the mob, the roar of a mob seeking a victim. His feet itched to go in another direction, but his eyes chained him to the spot. He might be the victim sought, his mind told him, but his eyes demanded that the feet stay there.

With brazen clangor, a police ambulance coursed up the street and stopped with shrieking brakes before the store. Fascinated, Charlie Chong watched the grim dispatch with which the attendants unfolded the stretchers, stretchers intended for—

The young man gasped as this avenue of possibilities opened before him.

Petrified he stood and stared.

A patrol wagon dashed up in the wake of the ambulance and a swarm of blue-coats was disgorged. With flailing night-sticks they clubbed their way through the crowd to permit the ambulance surgeon and his aids to reach the scene of bloodshed.

The roar of the mob was no longer dull and sullen, but crescendoed with the cries of those whose skulls had felt the flailing night-sticks.

From out the human maelstrom, Charlie Chong saw a small, but aged man wriggle himself free and dash away. His clothes were streaming ribbons that trailed out behind him as he raced toward Stockton Street, but as he broke through the crowd, the young editor had glimpsed his features. Even at that distance, he knew the skull-like head could have belonged to but one man in all the world.

The little man was Ho Si Bing.

With this flash of recognition, the castles in Cathay that Charlie Chong had builded within his mind so tenderly, again slumped to earth as ruined dust. The whole story of the tragedy screened by the mob unfolded itself before him with the climactic crash of a well developed fictional dénouement. The answer to the scene was patent.

Bong Lee, the scholar, had met his favorite and dearest enemy, Ho Si Bing, whose boasted necromancy had given him no warning.

These rival ancients had come face to face, backed and spurred by clouds of followers—followers that he, Charlie Chong, had asked them to recruit to aid him.

He could almost picture the meeting. Words, scalding words had poured from the lips of these bitter old men, their hate magnified by years. He flushed at the thought of those words, for each possessed a venom-charged tongue.

Then blows, perhaps the knife or gun—even the ancient hatchet.

Blood—the police—the ambulance. Ho Si Bing's successful flight. The swirling mob. The cries and oaths of adversaries. Each thing he saw, each sound he heard, told the story with corroborative detail.

Benumbed, he turned to half-stagger up the hill to the office of the *Chung Mei Bo*. With head bowed low, he entered the tiny room that soon would know him no more. Upon his desk was a pile of half-wrapped packages, their covers torn as though prying eyes had sought to glimpse their contents. Beside the desk stood the recently returned Tze Mong, appraising with studious mien, the page advertisement of the chain stores in the *Chung Mei Bo*.

"The learned Ho Si Bing brought these and departed hurriedly—much disheveled," said the publisher with a gesture toward the motley upon the desk. "He said that he was sorry, but the packages were torn in the crush."

A wave of gratitude mitigated the sorrow that engulfed Charlie Chong. Even in a moment of great tragedy—even perhaps at the peril of his freedom, Ho Si Bing had not forgotten—a true Chinese of the old school.

"Then he evaded arrest?" murmured Charlie. "I am glad."

"Arrest?" Tze Mong's eyebrows elevated until they were above the rims of his round spectacles.

"Yes—the police and the ambulance arrived just before I did—at the store, you know—the store that gave us that advertisement."

"The police—*Aih*." Tze Mong stroked his button of a nose, "and I was about to congratulate you upon—"

He gestured toward the open copy of the paper before him.

"Please—please don't." Misery shed a hollow light from the young man's usually sparkling eyes. "I tried, worthy Tze Mong, tried very hard to—"

A babel of high, excited voices drowned the usual creaking of the stairs and the two men turned to see the gaunt form of Bong Lee lurch into the room.

"Then you—you are not dead, revered Bong Lee," gasped Charlie, as he glimpsed the schoolmaster.

"Not dead, but nearly so," rasped the tattered scholar, "but never—not even for you—will I again battle as I have this day. That turtle's son, Ho Si Bing, tried to snatch the last patent potato peeler from my grasp and I drove him hence—the vermin, scum of gutters. It was on your list and—"

Charlie Chong remembered in a horror-stricken moment that he had placed patent potato peelers upon several lists.

"—and," Bong Lee continued, "although I struggled valiantly, I was unable to complete my purchases in your behalf. Some of my friends were more fortunate before the police came and closed the store."

Again the nimbus of sorrow that had lifted ever so slightly during this recital, shut down upon the young editor. The police had closed the store. Finis had been written.

"And the ambulance was not for you?" the youth asked.

"No—not for me. Several worthy matrons of our race were struck down at the ribbon counter," responded Bong Lee, "some of the younger set indulged in fisticuffs over cherished objects. Blood flowed

—sparingly as befits the gentler sex—but the ambulance was called although the casualties might be described as trivial.”

“And the police?” suggested Tze Mong, an interested listener.

“As the entire stock had been sold out, leaving only bare shelves, they were summoned to clear the store that new merchandise might be installed,” the scholar replied.

“Oh!” Charlie Chong’s brown eyes were no longer almond shaped, but round with wonder.

Bong Lee’s last words had lighted, flare-like, a picture of success—colossal success. He scarcely heard the formal words of farewell nor noted the growing pile of purchases upon his desk, left by the members of the schoolmaster’s party.

From a drawer, the young man took a box of neatly printed cards—cards he had prepared for his triumph. For an hour he had thought of them as useless, mocking things, but now—he handed one to his employer. Upon it was printed:

CHARLES CHONG, A. M.

San Francisco, Cal.

Chinese-American News.

“I have been trying to congratulate you for half an hour,” Tze Mong broke in upon the young man’s joyful reveries.

The telephone rang sharply and Charlie Chong answered to be told that Jones & Company wished to speak with him. A clicking within the instrument and then:

“This is Mr. Harvey speaking. I’ve had some trouble getting you, but I wanted to

say that we find that we can take some space in your paper. I was talking with Mr. Estcourt of the chain stores at lunch to-day and he told me of the remarkable results he got through your medium. I imagine you’ll get some nice business from him. I have some copy ready. When can you come over?”

“Right away,” this breathlessly.

He turned to tell Tze Mong of the new victory, his skinny legs itching to be traveling to the advertising sanctum of Jones & Company.

“I shall have to hurry,” Charlie paused as he rose from his chair. “You see—”

“But who is to look after the news?” the publisher asked querulously.

“The *Chung Mei Bo* should be thoroughly modern,” the young man replied with great seriousness. “As head of the advertising department, I can supervise the news—it is done on all progressive dailies. You can get another editor. Give the eminent Bong Lee a chance. He wants to break into journalism and he’s only seventy-two. Besides, I want my evenings free. I promised to take your lovely daughter, Tze Chan, to a movie to-night.”

Tze Mong lowered puzzled eyes to the card he still held and studied it. Although proud of his foreign learning, he spoke English seldom. He appraised the legend before him with puckering brow.

“Charlie Chong, A. M.,” he read, staying the already hurrying legs that were bearing their owner doorward. “You are not an American college man, I know—what do these letters—A. M.—stand for?”

“Why — Advertising Manager — of course,” Charlie Chong called back, as he dashed down the creaking stairs.

THE END

♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

NEXT WEEK

In addition to the start of the New Series, “Hopalong Cassidy’s Pal,” by Clarence E. Mulford, the issue for May 2 will contain a spirited Complete Novelette

“THE SEAGOING ELEPHANT”

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS, Author of “Gold from the Cañon.”



White Dishonor

By ARTHUR MILLS

IN the first place, Bob Summers asked if I did not think Wade Caley a cad. He subsequently asked me a much more startling question, and one more difficult to answer. But as regards the original inquiry his grounds for making it were these.

Wade apparently had been encouraging Natalie to gamble. He had introduced her to a club where cards were played for high points.

Natalie, it might be supposed, could look after herself in such a matter. But according to Bob she had virtually been trapped, not realizing the nature of the stakes until she found herself in difficulties.

"Wade oughtn't to do it," said Bob. "He knows she can't afford to lose. It is just like him, though. He'll stick at nothing where a woman is concerned. I don't believe he would even hesitate to cheat at cards. Some one ought to have shot him long ago."

We all loved Natalie. In the days before she married she had been ultramodern, even

in ultramodern times. To every one's surprise, she had married a fellow with no money—a very decent sort of chap who had a job as a game ranger somewhere in Africa, and gone out with him to some God-forsaken spot. Now after two years she had come home for a change, leaving the husband out there. Attractive at all times, even more so since her absence, it was not long before Wade Caley was running after her.

There was nothing new in this. Wade was always running after some presentable woman. It was all he lived for, and he could afford the hobby. He had paid two thousand pounds for a two-seater car. Any other man buying a car at such a price would have had one with four seats. But Wade said no woman could resist a really luxurious two-seater. That was the sort of fellow he was.

He was a big, fresh-complexioned chap, with rather prominent blue eyes, always well dressed, well fed, and well circumstanced. A lot of people laughed at him

and treated him as a joke, for he was always very frank about himself and as pleased as a child with a new toy when he was having success with a pretty lady.

However, he ought to have left Natalie alone. To encourage a poor man's wife to gamble was a dirty trick.

Wade gave me his own version. He was a fellow one would very much rather never have spoken to; but in the absence of an excuse, which he was careful never to provide, one had no option when he said good morning, except to conform to the usages of polite society. Wade, having said good morning, launched into a discourse on Natalie.

"Poor kid, she is just gambling because she is miserable," he said.

"Miserable!" I repeated. "Why, I thought the marriage was such a happy one."

Wade shook his head. "Husband drinks like a fish."

"What! Who told you that?"

"She did. That's why she has come home."

Now, Bob Summers, who knew Natalie as well as any of us, had never said one word about this.

So much by way of preamble. Now, with the aid of a little imagination, for the tale.

II.

NATALIE had twenty-four hours to pay, and not one soul in the world to whom she *would* go for help. That was the streak of pride in her, for of course she had plenty of friends; only, having married a poor man, she was all the more reluctant to come down on them.

The hour was now about 8 P.M. Before the banks closed to-morrow she must make good the five hundred pounds she owed Caley, and she had not even twopence to pay for another check form, much less the money in the bank.

She reviewed her assets in the glass: a skin white with the whiteness of the moon; large, dark eyes with tiny shadows, like stormclouds in a fair sky beneath; a mouth willful and a trifle wayward; and a figure that was all that could be desired.

Wade was coming in a few minutes to take her out to dinner. They would eat caviare, partridge, and fresh peaches, she expected. Wade mostly liked the same things. He could order a stew of aloes that night, for all she cared.

A bell ringing made her start. Heavens! She was nervous this evening. Well, she had cause to be.

She heard the outer door close, then Wade's step in the corridor, saw the handle of her sitting room door turn, mobilized her will-power to secure self-command, and turned to greet him.

"Hope I am not late?"

Late, thought Natalie. The touch of his hand revolted her. Aloud she said: "Of course you are not, Wade. Have a cocktail? I have invented a new one."

Without waiting for his answer she went to a small table and began to prepare a drink. She must keep every minute occupied until they went out. It was her right to do this; her right, if she chose, not to see him until the same hour to-morrow. But this prerogative she had not exercised. On the contrary, she had rung him up and asked him to take her out to dinner.

The phone message had surprised Wade. Her last words had been: "By the laws of the club I have twenty-four hours to pay."

She had spoken almost menacingly. He had bowed gravely, and, when her back was turned, had smiled. A check for five hundred pounds was in his pocket. She knew as well as he did that it would be of no more value that time to-morrow. Hence his suggestion that they should come to a settlement about the matter without delay.

The proposition was, roughly, that Natalie should accept an invitation to stay at Mrs. Montagu's villa at Cannes, where Wade had also been invited. Natalie answered that she would let him know next day.

Wade said a little irritably that he would like to know that night; if they were going to travel together he must reserve accommodation.

It was at this point that she had explained that she had twenty-four hours to

pay and turned her back on him; only a bare hour afterward to ring him up and ask him to take her out to dinner. Truly, women were amazing, thought Wade, and life would be dull without them.

Wade's life would have been dull without them, certainly.

Natalie had always attracted him. He had known her before she married; but had not been able to get near her. There had been far too great a crowd. Then, to every one's surprise, she had married this fellow no one had ever heard of and gone out with him to Africa. At the time people said she would never stick it.

The point was, had she stuck it? Did she mean to go back to Africa? It looked as though she had had enough of Africa. Surely if she were going back she would not have gambled so high. Her husband's salary was small; altogether a most intriguing problem.

A problem certainly, but as far as Natalie was concerned not particularly intriguing. In fact, she was in the deuce of a mess. It was no good repeating to herself that she had been a fool. That was obvious.

She ought never to have gambled, in the first place. Only Wade had persuaded her—just for the fun of the thing, he said. Well, that was an argument that had always appealed to Natalie. She would jump a gate out hunting for the same reason. Then when she found she had lost twenty-five pounds—and twenty-five pounds was twenty-five pounds, when one's husband's salary was fifty pounds a month—she began to think.

Wade was there to help her.

"You were very unlucky," he said. "You held no cards at all. Never mind—get it back to-morrow."

This was where she ought to have declared quite firmly that she was never going to play again. But she hadn't, and that was all there was to it.

Well, she didn't get the money back the next night, or the night after; instead, she got deeper in the mud. Wade told her not to worry; her luck was sure to turn. It didn't. There came the fatal evening. A game for high points was suggested. The

chance offered to get back all she had lost. Wade urged her to take it. Natalie hesitated. She—she—hadn't got the money, not at the moment. Wade made light of this. That was all right; he would see her through, he promised.

However foolishly, she let him. And now he held her check for five hundred pounds. To-morrow he would present it at the bank, and it would be dishonored. There was nothing to do but to tell him the situation frankly.

He suggested he would give her one more chance to get out. After all, he was a rich man, and knew he would be paid eventually.

When she put the matter to Wade she got the shock of her life. His easy geniality vanished like a mirage. He said perfectly clearly that he was going to Monte Carlo the next evening, and that he would require the money before he went unless—unless she should care to go to Monte Carlo, too.

His meaning left no shadow of doubt. His intentions if she refused were adamant. He would notify the secretary of the club about the check, and Natalie would be posted. By eight o'clock the following night she would be dishonored. She could not even plead that she had suddenly lost her head and gambled above her means. The episode was a capital crime, the sequel to a series of peccadillos. There were others to whom she owed a lot of money, but not a large sum like this. Looked at one way, she was lucky to have escaped so long as she had.

This, then, was the situation when she got back to her flat at seven o'clock. She had sat down before her fire and smoked cigarette after cigarette. Some way must be found to make Wade give her another chance. At seven thirty she came to a conclusion, and telephoned him. At eight fifteen she stood appareled, bathed, perfumed, to greet him, dressed—as he thought—for the sacrifice.

"Where would you like to dine?" he asked.

"At the Café de Rome; we can dance there."

Wade was quite agreeable to this. Their

table was set in an alcove. Wade spread some caviare on crisp, hot toast and lifted his glass of champagne.

"I thought you were really angry with me to-night.

"I was," Natalie admitted.

"But you are not angry any more." He laid his hand on her wrist.

"It would not be much use, would it?"

His eyes dwelt long on her face. She was a baby with that quaint curly little mouth of hers. She looked so pretty now; quite different from the way she looked at the card table. Amazing how plain even the prettiest woman could look when her luck was out at cards. For a moment in Wade's mind the protective instinct asserted itself.

"You ought never to have gambled so high," he chided. "In fact, you ought never to gamble at all."

"If I hadn't I shouldn't be dining here with you, should I?"

"Then I am glad you did." His fingers tightened on her wrist. She freed her hand. How she wished he wouldn't paw her about!

"What train are you going by to-morrow—the late one?" she asked.

"Whichever you like."

"I didn't say I was coming."

"Ah, but you are." Wade's rather prominent eyes twinkled.

Natalie said nothing, but her thought was: "The man's a fool."

They finished their partridge and came to the peaches. A space in the center of the room had been cleared for dancing.

Wade, as a matter of fact, was not quite such a fool. He did not think Natalie liked him. It would have been odd, after all his experience, if he had not become a fair judge of whether a woman was attracted by him or not. During dinner he formed a decided opinion that Natalie was not attracted by him. This was very worrying. All the same, he thought she might go to the south of France.

He would try to find out a little more about this husband left behind in Africa. She had married the fellow for love—must have done so, for he had no money—and a woman must be pretty fond of a fellow

to go and live with him in the back of beyond for two years. Much depended on how matters had shaped since.

"How did you like it in Uganda?" he asked.

"It is a wonderful country." Natalie spoke without enthusiasm.

"You'll be glad to get back there?"

"I am not going back."

Wade looked at her keenly. Natalie could read the thoughts in his muddy mind. He wanted to find out how she got on with her husband. It was the first thing that type of man tried to do.

"Not going back? Has your husband given up his interest out there?"

"He hasn't any, except drink." Natalie looked down at her plate.

Wade controlled his surprise, for that Natalie was unhappily married was news indeed.

"Let us talk of something else," she said, taking a quick, comprehensive survey of Wade's face.

"I suppose that was why you started gambling; didn't know what to do with yourself."

"Perhaps." Natalie looked a little sad.

"Poor kid." Wade stretched out a semi-proprietary hand.

Natalie quickly pushed back her chair.

"Let's dance," she suggested.

They danced and talked and danced till the time came for the restaurant to close.

"Like to go on anywhere else?" asked Wade.

"I'd like to go back to the club and try my luck again."

"Now look here." Wade took her arm. "I'm going to tell you something. You are out of luck. If you played again you would only lose more. Make up your mind to give it a rest; it's the only thing to do."

If only the man would stop pawing her. Natalie felt she would hit him in the face in a minute. However, she controlled herself and did not move.

"Just once more," she said.

"No," answered Wade.

"My luck might change."

That was just what Wade was thinking. If it did, he would lose her; and if it didn't,

he would lose double the amount of money. The proposition did not appeal to him from any angle. He shook his head.

Natalie freed herself from him. They were standing in the hall of the restaurant; other diners were waiting to obtain their coats.

"Then you can take that check and frame it, for all I care."

Natalie took no pains to speak in a low voice. When she was angry she never cared who knew it.

Wade appreciated that this was an ultimatum. He considered whether he would accept a declaration of war. If he did, he could harm her, but he would not do himself any good. On the other hand, if he lent her more money to gamble again, her luck might change and she might get free from him altogether. The story he had just learned about her husband proved the deciding factor. Had she still been happily married and only anxious to regain her money so that she could return to the man she loved, he would not have agreed. But she was adrift and—well, the case was different. Kindness often brought its own reward.

III.

THEY returned to the club and made up a table of five. One of the other players was Bob Summers, and it was from him I heard what happened. He knew more or less how matters stood between Natalie and Wade Caley. At least he knew Natalie had lost a great deal more than she could afford and that she owed the money to Wade. Bob and Natalie were old friends, and she admitted as much to him while the table was being prepared.

The other players only knew Natalie had been losing heavily. In the short time she had played she had already earned the reputation of being a reckless gambler. They had followed her to her table for the pickings while she was out of luck. There are always vultures of this sort in every club. The Mrs. Montagu who had invited Natalie to Cannes was one of them, and a man called Bluett.

As the table was arranged, Bob Summers sat between Wade Caley and Nata-

lie, Mrs. Montagu and Bluett directly opposite.

Play began. A stranger coming into the room half an hour later might have guessed Natalie's luck had remained atrocious. The expression on her face while the cards were being dealt told its story. She looked taut, and there was a stunted gleam of hopefulness in her eyes, infallible signs that she had sold her soul to the god of chance and lost her faith in him.

In all countries the unlucky gambler's expression is the same. In the Cercle Privé of Monte Carlo, in the Fantan Dens of Macao, the imprint is universal; but it stamps itself much more deeply upon the faces of the women than upon those of the men.

Nevertheless, it was impossible not to admire the way Natalie rose to the emergency when the crisis came.

It is easy to bluff when the cards are running well and you are playing with the table's money; but when every hand throughout the night has gone against you—when you are down to your last chip—when the fellow opposite has bet the maximum and doesn't look as though he cared a hang whether he won or lost—when the others have dropped out one by one and the card you have drawn has made a busted flush—then it takes a good player to keep hands steady and eyes inscrutable and double the bet.

There came such a time for Natalie.

Wade Caley had been winning; he seemed literally to be expanding in the genial warmth of his success. Leaning back in his chair, his fat cheeks sunk in his collar, his pearl-studded shirt front bulging, his little pig eyes watching now one player, now another, he looked like a puff adder sunning itself.

Then came an ace pot, rich from several deals. The pot had gone round unopened for the sixth time when Wade spoke.

"I'll open it," he said, putting out two five-pound counters.

An experienced eye could have told instantly those who were sorry. Natalie looked content.

Wade, catching her expression, smiled at

her. At least he imagined he smiled. Bob Summers called it a leer.

"I'll raise," said Natalie. "I make it twenty pounds to play."

Mrs. Montagu and Bluett dropped out.

"I'll double that," said Wade quietly.

Summers felt, holding the cards he did, that he must stay in, but did not care for his position sitting between the two.

"How many cards?" the dealer asked Wade.

"I'll play these," said Wade, and—as Summers described him—he looked across at Natalie just like a puff adder about to strike.

Summers said if ever he felt sorry for a woman, he did for Natalie then. He guessed she held good cards herself, and it was a cruel moment to find a "pat" hand in against her on the pot she hoped to get out on on the right.

"How many cards?" The dealer turned to Summers.

Bob Summers was leaning forward, his hand held anyhow, as was his way. He always said it didn't matter who saw what you had before the draw. Actually the only person, as they were sitting, who could have seen what he held was Natalie.

He had four to a flush with a queen of the wrong color. He discarded the queen and asked for a card, took one look at it, and threw his hand on the table. A busted flush was going to be no good in that game.

"How many?" The dealer turned to Natalie.

She hesitated, looking at her hand. Then she showed her cards to Summers. Superficially the game was being played in friendly fashion. Summers looked at her cards and said nothing. There was nothing he could say. She held three queens and he himself had discarded the *fourth*. She certainly was not in luck.

"How many cards, please?" repeated the dealer.

"Two, please. No, one—sorry," Natalie corrected herself.

She threw her discard on the table, but did not immediately pick up the card dealt to her.

A moment's silence followed, which Summers broke.

"Does any one smell anything burning?" he asked. "Yes, look, some one's cigarette is on the carpet by the fireplace."

Looking round, they saw the remains of a cigarette which somebody had tried to throw into the grate.

Bluett got up and stamped it out.

"Well, who opened this pot?" asked the dealer.

"I did," said Wade Caley.

"You bet then." Natalie looked across at him. She was perfectly calm.

"I'll bet what's on the table," said Wade carelessly. "How much is there?"

Mrs. Montagu counted the chips.

"About one hundred and twenty-five pounds," she answered.

"I'll double that," said Natalie rather quietly.

The tense silence that always follows high betting fell upon the room.

Wade considered his hand.

"I'm sorry. I shall have to double you again," he said.

"How much do I owe you already?" asked Natalie.

Wade wondered why she asked the question. She knew perfectly well the check she had written was for five hundred pounds. However, he made a show of taking it from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Very well, then," said Natalie. "We'll call it one thousand pounds or nothing."

"You double again?" asked Wade, now for the first time beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Natalie nodded.

Seeing that she couldn't pay him in any case if she lost, Wade now judged it was time the betting stopped.

"All right, I'll see you," he said. "I've got an ace full."

"No good," said Natalie. "I've got *four* queens."

She spread them on the table.

A murmur ran round the table. Wade, looking rather green, handed Natalie back her check. Summers pushed back his chair. "If you don't mind, I won't play any more to-night," he announced.

The game broke up. Natalie, Mrs. Montagu, and Bluett left the room.

Summers asked Wade Caley to stay behind.

IV.

It was later that Summers came to me and made the startling statement alluded to at the beginning of this tale.

"But how," I asked, "do you know for certain that Natalie's hand was faked?"

A terrible look came into his eyes. "Any one would think you had never played poker, old boy. She had showed me her hand, and she had three queens. I had the other, and had discarded it. There are only four queens in a pack, you know."

"You mean," I said slowly, "she knew you had thrown that queen and deliberately picked it up instead of the card she ought to have taken?"

I was rather scandalized, for, after all, cheating at cards is cheating.

Bob laughed. "Not quite. When attention was distracted by the cigarette burning on the carpet *I gave it to her*. But for the Lord's sake, never tell her so; she thought it was the card Wade had dealt her. And what's more," added Bob, "when we were alone I told Wade Caley I'd done it, and

that I'd take a horsewhip to him if he ever breathed a word of the matter to a soul."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. That kind never do."

We stood silent for a moment. Bob, I think, was considering if I thought he had done right.

Presently he spoke again, a little defiantly.

"Dick—this was Natalie's husband—gets home on Saturday. I wasn't going to have her meet him and say she'd lost a thousand quid. Swindled out of it practically, for she didn't understand the game."

"Dick! But I thought—I mean Wade Caley told me—"

I repeated what Wade had said about Natalie and Dick.

Bob laughed. "She told me about that; she said she had to spin a hard luck story to get Wade to give her another chance. As a matter of fact, all she said was that her husband's only interest was drink, and that's true. He's given up his job as game ranger and been appointed sole agent out there for some one's whisky. Quite a good billet, I hear."

THE END



IN HIS LITTLE HOME TOWN

HIS heart's in his little home town, I know,
 His heart's in his own home town.
 Though the city has hurried to and fro
 To give him his high renown,
 He is lonely still, and he longs to go
 Back to his little home town.

The friendly talks at the corner store,
 He does not get them here.
 These are the things that he wants once more,
 The things that he holds most dear:
 Trees, and porches, and little front yards,
 And friendly neighbors near.

Business may keep him under its thumb,
 And duty may say "Thumbs down;"
 And motors may clang and trolleys hum,
 And his dreams of the home place drown.
 But his heart's in the little home town he knew,
 His heart's in his own home town.

Mary Carolyn Davies.



The Bad Man of Banter Mountain

By HOWARD E. MORGAN

BUTCH KEEVER stopped within the doubtful shelter of a cottonwood shrub and wiped the dust and sweat out of his eyes. The shimmering strip of yellow sand before him, dividing twin rows of ramshackle, unpainted houses, was the main street of Banter Flats.

Not a soul was in sight. The town was not deserted, however. They were merely keeping out of sight until he had gone. They were afraid. Afraid of him.

He grinned, squared his heavy shoulders, tipped the dilapidated derby at a rakish angle over one eye, adjusted the pearl handled gun in its holster and plodded on, holding with difficulty to the center of the rutted roadway. Hushed voices sounded from behind closed shutters as he passed. Hidden eyes peered out at him. Outwardly, he scowled fiercely.

Nearing his destination, which was Squint Dugan's place, his blurred eyes discovered

a woman in a white dress coming toward him along the board sidewalk. She was still some distance away. His eyes had been playing him tricks ever since he left the sheep herder with the home made whiskey. This, no doubt, was another illusion. Still, that woman did look like Mrs. Keever. The same confident stride, the same red hair. He slipped ponderously behind an unpainted shack that jutted out into the roadway.

A little girl appeared, schoolbooks on a strap dangling from a brown arm.

"Hey, Sissy!" He beckoned her.

She came timidly toward him. Looked him over from head to foot.

"You're drunk," she announced.

He nodded solemnly. "Yeah, sure enough. But listen, Sissy—that there woman—know her?" He aimed a thick forefinger waveringly.

"That isn't a woman. That's Squint

Dugan—just with his white apron on—and—”

After much effort he succeeded in verifying this statement. Then, his stubby black beard parted in a roar of laughter. He found a coin and held it toward his informant.

But she had already taken to her heels. Her only response to his bellowing call was a fearful glance over her shoulder.

He stared owlishly after the tiny figure, achieving a pained expression that set comically on his bloated visage. The kid was afraid of him. She shouldn't be afraid. He wouldn't hurt her.

Before a store window he paused and surveyed his wavering reflection critically.

He was a sight right enough. Clothes wrinkled and dirty. Face puffed and brick red, blistered by the desert sun. Eyes bloodshot. The bad man of Banter Mountain. He looked the part. No wonder the youngster was scared.

Well, this was his last spree—in Banter Flats. He had promised Martha. And—they didn't appreciate him—here. However, Squint Dugan and his gang of rough-necks must be duly impressed once and for all. On his last two trips he had refused to let Dugan rob him. Dugan was sore. He would probably try to start something. There was much new blood in Banter Flats, too. It wasn't like it used to be. Well, he'd show them—once and for all—

He paused dramatically just inside Dugan's swinging doors. His little red-rimmed eyes casually explored the smoky room, finally coming to rest on a long, new counter littered with odds and ends of wearing apparel, groceries, *et cetera*, evidencing Squint Dugan's recent branching out in the field of commerce.

There were many new faces. Few familiar ones. Times were changing. Everything seemed different. He sensed an air of levity.

A few mumbled greetings to which he did not reply. Some one laughed. He scowled fiercely and weaved toward the bar on the opposite side of the room.

But Dugan's cheap liquor produced no satisfying kick. That sheep herder's brew must have been powerful stuff. He swayed dizzily on his feet. His reflection in the

mottled mirror behind the bar danced and blurred. In a hazy way he knew that something was expected of him. Ordinarily, suitable material never seemed to lack. But, just now—it was so cool, so quiet. He experienced a sudden, overpowering desire to sleep. Slumped wearily into a chair.

Squint Dugan arrived, white aproned, bustling, and greeted him boisterously. Butch paid him no attention. His shaggy head sagged over the greasy table.* But he heard them when they started kidding him. For a time he feigned sleep. A wise crack by Dugan brought a gale of laughter. And then—

“Bad man? I'm laffin'. All you fellers been beefin' about fer a week is whut a tough egg this guy Kever is. Best thing he does is sleep. Lookit him. He—”

This was Kid Goler, Dugan's new bartender. An evil faced youth with cauliflower ears. He stood with his back to Butch, addressing an appreciative audience at a big round table.

“Sleepin', eh? You putty faced Piute—”

Butch lurched to his feet. His clutching fingers gripped the speaker's shoulder, swung him about. His free hand swept outward and down. But that blow never landed. Kid Goler ducked. Pulled free. Sprawled backward, tipping over a table and incidentally upsetting several spectators.

Butch plunged headlong into the flailing mêlée of arms and legs which contained the young man with the cauliflower ears. In the confusion the latter escaped.

When he finally struggled free he was breathing hard and perspiring freely. But he felt better. Silence greeted him as he ranged up against the counter and sought to roll a cigarette. This was better. No one could laugh at him, Butch Kever, and get away with it. They lined up against the opposite wall now, watching him closely. They were afraid.

Half a dozen vacant chairs near by invited him. He longed to accept their mute invitation. But no—it would never do. They must not know that he was all in. He leaned heavily against the flimsy counter. Sought to clear his erratic vision by concentrating on some definite object.

A small table in a far corner finally caught and held his attention. A man sat at this table. A little man, brown skinned, drab whiskered, with mild, watery blue eyes. Of the dozen or more men in the big, square room, this little chap, alone, seemed to be paying no attention whatsoever to Butch Keever.

In an open palm he held several small coins. He was counting them, over and over again. From time to time his gaze shifted to two long pasteboard boxes prominently displayed on Dugan's new counter. These boxes each contained a doll. Identical in size. One was dressed in pink, the other in blue. Subconsciously, Butch realized that the little man had been engaged in his idiotic pastime for the past half hour.

Following Butch's gaze every man in the room was now watching the man with the yellow whiskers. Smiles appeared. Butch had found a victim. Andy Gregg. A harmless homesteader from back in the hills.

All oblivious to the fact that he had suddenly become the center of attraction, Gregg, with a final shrug of his thin shoulders, approached the counter, counted out the silver and pointed silently to the box containing the pink doll. Grinning, Squint Dugan hastened to oblige. As he was about to wrap the box in an old newspaper, the little man reached for it, removed the doll with careful fingers and inspected it thoroughly. Laughter greeted this performance.

"Hey, you!" Butch Keever stamped forward.

The little man turned questioning eyes. Doll in hand, he calmly awaited developments.

Keever approached with grotesque, mincing steps. Slapped the little man lightly on the hand.

"Le's you an' me play, eh, Willy." Much laughter. Gregg grinned uncertainly.

With a sudden motion Keever snatched the doll away. Caught the little man's resistless arm, piloted him across the room, and thrust him solidly up against the wall. The grin had left Gregg's lips. Otherwise, by not the slightest sign did he indicate his reaction to Keever's high handed methods.

"Wunst they was a feller what shot a apple off'n another feller's head. You-all remember him. Well, me an' Will's goin' t' play a li'l' game—like that."

The audience snickered hopefully. They didn't yet quite know what Butch had in mind, but—

Keever swept the proposed victim's dilapidated felt hat off, exposing a round, shiny, dome utterly devoid of hair.

"Well now, ain't that too bad. Expect as how by rights we should have some glue. Howsomever—"

After several attempts, purposefully fumbling, he set the doll astraddle of Gregg's bald head. Then he paced away the length of the room. Drew his gun. Brought it down in an elaborate arc until it focused waveringly on the pink doll.

Silence settled upon the room, complete, breathless. Here was no joke. Keever was a good shot, right enough. But—he was drunk. Something ought to be done—something—

Intervention came from an altogether unexpected source. Andy Gregg's right hand flashed to his open shirt. Came away with a gun. Twin reports in rapid succession echoed sharply back from the slab walls. Butch Keever grunted. Spun half about. His gun dropped clattering.

With his free hand, Andy Gregg recovered his hat, strode to the counter, placed the pink doll in its pasteboard box, wrapped it carefully in the old newspaper, then, without a single backward glance, pushed out through the swinging doors and away.

For a long minute after the homesteader had disappeared no man in the big room moved. Butch Keever had slumped into a chair. A tiny rivulet of blood trickled down one cheek. His face was very white. Not altogether from fear. He was not badly injured. But, the unexpected dénouement of the little comedy had sobered him very suddenly. So suddenly that it had caused an uncertain feeling in the pit of his stomach. And his heart seemed to have stopped beating.

Inspection disclosed a small blue hole through his right ear. The other bullet had creased his cheek. Keever had known just

what had happened before they told him. And it was this knowledge which had sobered him. The little man was a crack shot. Might easily have shot him—between the eyes. The little devil. He hadn't intended hurting him, either. A slow rage developed, grew upon him.

"The bad man of Banter Mountain! Ho, ho, ho—" It was the young man with the cauliflower ears again, safely ensconced behind the redwood bar.

Smiles appeared to vanish abruptly as Butch Keever sprang to his feet, gun in hand. Six shots brought a flutter of splinters from the bar behind which the young man was hiding. Following the sixth shot his head came to sight. He stuck thumb to nose, wriggled his fingers derisively, then scuttled away, still laughing, followed by Keever's gun.

II.

BUTCH KEEVER was roused next morning from his bed, which was the floor of Dugan's back room, by a bucketful of dirty water, which water held a taste and smell unpleasantly reminiscent of stale beer. His eyes struggled open just in time to catch a glimpse of Dugan's red head, as it disappeared around a corner. Butch was too miserable to be angry. Everything had gone wrong. First, it was the sheep herder's whisky. Then, Kid Goler, the young fellow with the cauliflower ears. The fiasco with Andy Gregg. And now—this.

He could hear Squint Dugan's shrill voice, raised high, telling all about how he had doused the bad man of Banter Mountain. Laughter. And still Butch Keever's ready anger refused to generate. His head ached. His mouth was parched and dry. He was sad. Very sad.

He had been imposed upon, that was what it amounted to. Every one and everything had conspired to make him miserable, to spoil his good time. A sudden, violent distaste for Squint Dugan and his troupe of unsavory hangers on ensued.

Continued laughter, half suppressed, came from the next room. Butch swore and groped painfully to his feet. Times had indeed changed. They were not afraid of him, these young roughnecks. But—they

couldn't laugh at him—and get away with it.

He clumped out into the main room. Dugan, Goler, and several others were gathered about a table, talking, laughing. When they saw him, they sobered.

"Ready t' go, Butch?"

"Go where?"

"W'y, you know. We framed it all up las' night. T' Andy Gregg's place."

Butch stared uncomprehendingly. Shook his head slowly.

"I don't remember—nothin'—"

Kid Goler shrugged, spat disgustedly. "Yella—like I said. I told you—"

"Jest a minnit, Kid. Butch, he's kinda woozy. He'll remember—all right." Dugan closed his good eye in a wink.

Butch did his best, but; the last thing he could recall was hurling his empty gun at Kid Goler's retreating figure.

He shook his head again.

"W'y, it was like this, Butch. You swore t' git even with that little runt, see? We framed it all up las' night. We wuz t' git away come sunup. He on'y lives a ways back in the hills. The Kid here knows where."

"Sure, you remember now, don't you, Butch?" Kid Goler tried his hand at refreshing the big man's memory. "The little skunk, he aimed to kill you, that's what he did. If you let him get away with it—he'll—he'll probably try it again. But that ain't all—the boys gave you the laugh. You remember that, don't you? They think you're afraid—afraid—"

"Who, me? Afraid?" Butch refused to believe his ears. This angle of the Gregg business had not occurred to him.

"Sure. Why not? You let him get away, didn't you. An' you never said a word. They gave you the razz fer keeps. If you don't take Andy Gregg apart, your name is mud around these diggings from now on."

Goler waited for this to sink in. It sunk; Keever moistened his dry lips nervously. His big hands clenched and unclenched.

"Now, I was only kiddin' yistiddy, Butch. Me, I'm a good fren' o' yourn. I'll go along with you, see? Jeff Brander 'll tag along, too. Jest in case some-

thin' happens, see? We don't want t' leave you up in the hills fer the wolves t' nibble at."

But this last sally was quite unnecessary. Kid Goler was a newcomer. He didn't know Butch Kever. He still held to the idea, despite Dugan's repeated assurances to the contrary, that the bad man of Banter Mountain was not such a much. One of the old time bad men. Lots of noise. No stuff.

"T' hell with you! I'm goin'—right now—alone. An'—I'm bringin' back that little runt, An' I'll stan' him on his head—an'—"

III.

TEN minutes later Butch Kever was on his way to the Gregg homestead in the foothills of Mount Currier. And he traveled—alone.

Not until his long legs, urged by a righteous rage, had carried him halfway to his destination, did it occur to him that the sun was high and that he had come away without food. The instant he realized it, however, he was possessed of a mighty hunger.

By the-time he reached the fringe of cottonwoods bordering the gentle slopes of Mount Currier, he was actually suffering. Hunger shared first place in his feverish thoughts with Andy Gregg.

Fortunately he encountered no difficulty in locating the cart path, which, according to Squint Dugan and Kid Goler, led to the Gregg homestead. "Just a piece up the road," they had said.

Butch plodded on and on, getting hungrier and hungrier, uglier and uglier.

The sun was low when he came out upon a sizable clearing, in the center of which reposed a substantial log cabin. Andy Gregg's place, without doubt. Yes, that was Gregg himself, puttering about in the garden. Although tired and hungry to the point of exhaustion, seething with long accumulated rage, Kever, nevertheless, approved of the workmanlike job which the man, Gregg, had done in establishing this, his home, in the wilderness. The soil was undeniably rich, too. An agricultural bonanza in years to come.

He followed to the furthestmost tip of a triangular shaped grove of poplars. At this point the little cabin was less than a hundred feet distant. Andy Gregg was still working in the garden, dabbing here and there with a short-handled hoe.

But his mind didn't seem to be on his work. From time to time he looked back over his shoulder, longingly it seemed, toward where a noisy stream tumbled down over the rocks. From within the cabin came the sound of singing. A woman's voice. The pleasant clatter of pots and pans.

Butch Kever fidgeted about uneasily. Women appalled him. He was invariably helpless in their presence. What to do? He must keep his word. Bring Andy Gregg back to Banter Flats. But—how to avoid the woman?

A chorus of shrill calls from behind the cabin presaged the appearance of two youngsters. A girl and a boy, perhaps five and six years old, respectively. The boy disappeared within the cabin. The little girl joined her father. She carried the pink doll. Butch eyed her appreciatively.

He liked kids. She was a pretty little thing with a pert, saucy face framed with honey colored hair. Here was more trouble. How to isolate Andy Gregg? Butch shrugged disgustedly. His heart wasn't in it somehow. Still, it had to be done. They had laughed. And—his reputation as the bad man of Banter Mountain must be maintained.

He had about decided to rush boldly forward; whack the homesteader over the head with the hoe and carry him away bodily, when a new involvement presented itself in the guise of a warm, softly moving breeze. This gentle breeze conveyed the unmistakable aroma of fresh cooked coffee to Butch Kever's quivering nostrils.

He sighed gustily. Edged about so that he could see the inside of the cabin. The woman was preparing supper before an open fire. As he watched, she turned a huge slice of steak in a pan. Saliva dripped from the corners of his mouth. Great Heaven, he was hungry!

Gregg abruptly laid down his hoe and started purposefully toward the cabin. Dis-

appeared within. Moved to action, Butch, too, started toward the cabin. He had no plan in mind. Andy Gregg must not escape, that was all. Of course there was the woman, but—

He blundered in through the open door. Stumbled over a cat which had been hungrily observing the woman's preparations for supper. The beast yowled. The woman turned, a startled look showing briefly in her dark eyes. Then she wiped her hands on the back of her apron, smiled, and came toward him, hand outstretched. Andy Gregg had disappeared.

"I didn't hear you rap, stranger. Come right in."

Butch took her hand awkwardly.

"Andy—my man—will be back in a minute. Jest gone to the spring for water."

Butch merely gulped.

"You're tired, an' probably hungry. Supper 'll be ready in a jiffy. Bud—git some water for the gentleman—an' some soap!"

Still speechless from this unexpected turn in affairs, Butch followed the youngster around to the side of the cabin. The while he splashed aimlessly in the cool water with an audience of two wide-eyed youngsters, he wondered vaguely how it had been possible for Andy Gregg to disappear so suddenly and completely. He had left the cabin by the back door, of course. But he, Butch, had entered the cabin not a dozen feet behind him.

His toilet completed, Butch paused at the cabin door, seriously contemplating flight. It seemed the easiest way out. But no—he had said that he would bring Andy Gregg back with him. And—

"Supper's ready, stranger. Sit right down. We won't wait for Andy. He's probably trying a cast in Squaw Brook. Trout time now. Andy, he's crazy about fish. Can't git no work out of him no-how when they're a bitin'."

She laughed, a pleasant, hearty laugh.

Butch grinned despite himself. She was a friendly sort. She wasn't afraid either. Most women were afraid of him.

Beefsteak, mashed potatoes, fresh peas—coffee. Lots of everything. Butch hesitated. A mighty struggle raged within him.

Here was he, Butch Keever, bad man of Banter Mountain, wanting to eat at the table of a man who had made him the laughing stock of two counties. What a fool! Gregg would tell about it in town, of course, even if he didn't pull a gun fight now. And then—

Perspiration rolled down Butch's face. He felt weak and dizzy. Caught a chair back for support.

The woman came hurriedly toward him, sympathy in her nice eyes.

"You're sick—"

Butch grinned sheepishly as she pushed a chair under his trembling knees.

"Here, drink this."

Hot coffee. Nectar of the gods. Butch gulped it greedily.

"You're hungry, that's what's the matter. I know. Andy, he acts like that—"

With a sigh, Butch attacked the huge plateful of food which Mrs. Gregg placed before him.

Defeat had its compensations, however. Never had food tasted so good. She was a swell cook. Easily as good as Martha. Perhaps better. Even the youngsters watched, wondering amazement in their wide eyes as the huge slices of steak disappeared.

"There's lots more, stranger. Finish it up. Do. We got a whole beef out in the spring-house. Andy he'll ketch him a trout, most likely."

Satiation came at last.

Butch rolled a cigarette and tilted back against the wall. He felt that pleasant, guilty glow like a youngster who has assured himself of the excellence of a forbidden jar of jam and awaits discovery.

From utter silence he merged abruptly into loquaciousness.

He found Mrs. Gregg a good listener and an intelligent one. She knew timber and hogs and cattle and all of the thousand and one little things incidental to homesteading in the West. He forgot all about Andy Gregg.

It was dusk when the little man appeared. He wore a pleased grin. With only a passing glance at Butch, he proudly presented to his wife two beautiful speckled brook trout.

"Caught 'em one right after the other. In that pool—under the flat rock—you know—"

"I'll cook them both, Andy. They won't be so good to-morrow. Maybe the stranger will like some?"

"Right nice fish." Butch meant it, too. His eyes, sparkling appreciatively, were all for the fish. His business with Andy Gregg was forgotten, quite. It was not until he saw out of the corner of an eye the little man's fingers tentatively exploring his shirt front that his one-track mind switched abruptly back to the business in hand.

But Gregg apparently had no intention of starting anything.

He drew up a chair.

"They ain't nothin' t' brag about. Nothin' at all. W'y, in Thunder Crick, back yender in the hills a piece, wunst las' year I—"

Mrs. Gregg laughed.

"... nothin' but worms ..."

"Live millers goes best over my way. Angle worms never—"

An hour later, in the late purple dusk, Andy Gregg and the bad man of Banter Mountain sat on opposite sides of the Gregg doorstep and talked. Their faces were flushed. They argued excitedly.

"Ain't they nothin' you two men know but fish?" Mrs. Gregg appeared in the doorway, knitting in hand.

"I'm thinking you forgot to feed the hawks, Andy. Better do it now. Give the stranger a minute's peace."

Andy departed reluctantly.

"Kitty, show the stranger your new doll."

The yellow-haired tot came running. She grinned toothlessly up into Butch's face and held the pink doll proudly toward him.

"Well, now, that there's a bird."

He negotiated what was intended for a winning smile, reached for the flimsy, pink creation. But his clumsy grip in some way missed connections. The pink doll slipped through his clutching fingers, and fell with a crackling clatter, face down, on the stone doorstep. It broke in a hundred pieces.

For a moment there was silence—complete, ominous, like unto that breathless instant before a black stormcloud breaks.

Then, sobbing wildly, Kitty Gregg threw herself down beside the broken doll. Mrs. Gregg dropped on her knees and crooned comfortingly. Andy appeared and knelt beside his wife. Young Bud patted his sister's shoulder and with misty eyes glared accusingly at Butch Kever.

IV.

It was late that night when Butch Kever plodded down the dusty main street of Banter Flats. Not too late, however, for his purposes. It was Saturday, pay day at the Silver Bell Mine. Kid Goler, welter-weight from San Francisco, was scheduled to give an exhibition bout at Squint Dugan's, which bout would not take place until after the thirsty miners had had plenty of opportunity to spend some of their hard-earned money.

Dugan's place was packed to the doors with a noisy throng. The racket died away noticeably as Butch Kever elbowed his way through the smoke-dimmed room. Squint Dugan slid questing fingers beneath the new counter until they found and grasped an automatic pistol. The big man looked and acted queerly. He wasn't drunk, that was patent. But there was a strange gleam in his eyes. His thin lips were drawn in a straight, firm line. He, Squint Dugan, was taking no chances.

Kid Goler, garbed in a new pair of grass-green tights and a flowered bathrobe, was off duty for the evening. Perched on a table in the center of the room, feet on a chair, he left off advertising the fistic accomplishments of one Kid Goler when Butch appeared.

"Here's the old bird himself, gents. The bad man of Banter Mountain. What 'd you do with him, Butch? Eat him? Where's Andy Gregg?"

Squint Dugan signaled frantically to his henchman. He didn't like Kever's looks. But Goler paid no heed.

"Didn't you git him?"

Butch shrugged and grinned uncertainly. He was shuffling slowly but purposefully across the room toward Goler.

"Ho, ho, ho—kin you beat that?" Goler addressed the room at large. "What 'd I

tell you? Bad man—ho, ho—he's yella—yella through an'—"

With surprising suddenness Butch faced Goler. The Kid lost a large gob of his self-assurance when he peered up into those little black eyes. But—that was not all he lost.

The big man stepped back, struck out quickly, a wide swinging, mighty blow, with every ounce of his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind it. His clubbed fist caught Goler fairly under the jaw. The Kid skittered across the big table, turned clean about in mid air and brought up crashingly against the wall a dozen feet away.

Men fought to get out through the single door.

Witnessing this loss of potential trade, Dugan swore and gently brought his gun above the counter edge. But Kever had outguessed him. His big gun roared. The automatic flew from Dugan's fingers. He ducked behind the counter. Once again the big man's gun roared, bringing a bottle of Squint's choice brandy crashing down. Then Kever's thick fingers reached across the counter, sought and found Dugan's mop of red hair. Squint cursed and yelled and fought. All to no avail.

He was dragged irresistibly upward, off his feet, over the counter. His knees gave way when he struck the floor. But Butch jerked him upright. Pushed out with open palm, at the same time releasing his grip on the hair. Dugan's red head jerked away; he sprawled backward, joining Kid Goler on the floor against the wall.

Butch leaned an elbow on the yellow pine counter and grinned about at the half circle of dark faces. Then he turned to Dugan and Goler. The latter, apparently still in a daze, was groping upright along the smooth wall. Dugan, too, showed signs of life.

"You, Goler! C'mere!"

The Kid jumped as though he had been shot. Obeyed with astonished alacrity.

"Git that box over there. The one with the blue doll in it."

Goler paused not to question. In a brace of seconds he placed the box gently in the big man's outstretched hand.

"You, Dugan!"

Squint Dugan unhesitatingly responded to that harsh-voiced summons.

Breathless, bleeding, white-faced, he and Goler stood at attention.

Slowly, very, very carefully, Butch Kever extracted a bit of fluffy pink cloth from an inside pocket. Smoothed it out meticulously. It was a doll's dress.

"Y' see, she won't have nothin' but a pink one. Funny, ain't it? But kids has their notions same's the rest of us. Now—you boys see what you kin do. Them there dolls was jest the same, on'y one was pink an' t'other blue. Take that blue dress offen that there feller an' put the pink dress on. Git me? An' do a good job—er—"

"Not so bad. O' course, it ain't so good, neither—but— Wrap it up."

Dugan hastened to oblige.

"Naw, not in that newspaper. White stuff. That's it. Now—some o' that there pink ribbon."

Butch helped himself to a shipping tag from a hook on the wall, found a pencil, and wrote laboriously:

Kitty Gregg—from Butch.

"Now, Mr. Kid Goler, yo're takin' this t' Andy Gregg's place. Yo're deliverin' it personal t' Kitty Gregg. Understan'? An' yo're startin' now—right now. You'll make it by sunup."

"But, Butch, the Kid's due t' stage a fight. He—"

"He's startin' right now fer Andy Gregg's cabin. An', Kid—try not t' stray none 'r git lost, becuz—I'm visitin' Andy agin in a few days. Me an' him is goin' fishin'; he's got— But, like I was sayin', don't let nothin' whatsoever interfere with yore deliverin' that there parcel. I ain't threatenin' you, understan', but—if I was you I'd git started immediate an' I'd be terrible careful not t' fall' 'r anythin' like that."

Butch Kever leisurely followed Kid Goler's hurrying green figure as far as the swinging door. At the doorway he turned. Then—he tipped the battered derby far down over one eye, spat contemptuously.

"You kin all—go t' hell!"



Crosswords and Cow Hands

By JAMES W. EGAN

LINK UPTON, foreman of the Kickin' K, viewed the four heads bunched over the bunkhouse table with strong disapproval, even downright disgust. Every evening on the ranch now it was the same thing; this quartet of beef wranglers gathered under the lamplight from the moment the supper dishes were cleared away until late into the night.

"Have yuh got seven horryzontul yit, Doc?" came the harsh voice of sawed-off Stubby Larkin.

"Dang it, what's a period of time in three letters, nohow?" exploded Speck Hasty.

"Aw, that's in 'em every night, Speck!" jeered Pete Brown. "It's 'ery,' uv course!"

"Erie, hell!" Speck warmly retorted. "Ain't that the name uv a railroad back East? Sure! I took a trip on her once, yuh iggerant sheepherder! Erie!"

"Hold on, boys!" cried Doc Cushing, quelling incipient warfare. "The word is 'era'—e-r-a. And I think I've got seven horizontal now! It's practically an obsolete term."

Link Upton snorted mildly. Doc Cushing, the puncher who was rumored to have attended college in his youth, naturally had assumed leadership of the quartet when the crossword puzzle craze hit the Kickin' K. The erudite Doc knew scores of words the remainder of the outfit had been unaware existed.

The foreman's own education had been confined mainly to horses, cows and kindred things. Link could ride, rope and shoot with the best in Wyoming, and in his thirty-three years of life had gained a thorough and practical understanding of the cattle business. But when it came to book learning he was almost a total loss.

"Cow hands foolin' with patchwork puzzles!" he grumbled. "Crosswords, huh? They's liable to be a lotta cross words from old Ben Kennard if his wranglers don't start sleepin' more nights and less days. Reckon I'll have tuh chirp a bit."

Approaching closer to the table the foreman sarcastically voiced:

"Say, yuh hombres! They's fencin' to fix tuhorrow and post holes tuh dig! Yuh can't stay up all night fussin' over them fool squares. The old man—"

"We have it almost completed, Link," Cushing cut in, with a grin.

"Yeh, we want to show Miss Barrymore how much we got done at the dancin' lesson tuhorrow night," added Stubby Larkin.

"I reckon Miss Barrymore would rather have yuh untangle yuhr feet more and them puzzles less," tartly asserted Link.

Despite his gibe, however, the foreman knew Miss Bonita Barrymore, the pretty little dancing teacher in Dusty Creek, had really inspired the present crossword activities on the Kickin' K. Apparently, she was a very enthusiastic puzzle devotee; she had clipped squares from the newspapers and given them to the four wranglers, all her pupils, at the last lesson. And they were working them solely to please their attractive instructress.

Also a dancing pupil, Link himself secretly harbored a desire to please the cute Bonita. Not at all a ladies' man, he nevertheless had fallen hard for the girl who had come to Dusty Creek a few short weeks before to teach terpsichore to men and women of the ranges. He wanted very much to impress her favorably, but he had no intention of patching together puzzles. There must be a better way, he argued.

Pete Brown now felt he must unburden himself of an observation.

"We got six puzzles all worked, and I reckon we'll prove to Miss Barrymore we ain't all dumbheads on this ranch. It'd pay yuh tuh exercise yuhr brain more, Link. Yuh ain't—"

"I ain't seekin' no advice from a bow-legged jasper who's got so much brains he went to take a dancin' lesson wearin' spurs!" volleyed the foreman.

"Yeh?" growled Pete. "Well, say! Listen—"

A machine, unmistakably a flivver, rattled and chugged to a stop in the rear of the bunkhouse.

"That's Ed Sinclair back from Dusty Crick," hastily put in Stubby Larkin, ever a peacemaker. "Hope he didn't forget my smokin'!"

"He's prob'ly forgot everythin' but the white mule he generally finds there," commented Speck Hasty.

In another moment Ed Sinclair, the newest hand on the Kickin' K, had entered the bunkhouse. It was obvious he had had a few drinks, although he wasn't at all intoxicated.

"How's the ole town look, Ed?" Stubby queried.

"Rotten as ever!" grunted Sinclair. "Here's yuhr smokin'." He tossed over a package.

"Yuh're back early tuhnight," said Link. "Got nothin' on yuhr hip, have yuh?"

"No."

The newest hand puzzled the foreman a bit. Sinclair was an unusual sort. About thirty years of age, he was a tall, dark man, rather taciturn and surly. Possibly a month previously he had clattered up to the Kickin' K in a battered flivver, and asked for a wrangling job.

"Judas Priest!" surprised Ben Kennard had commented. "Whut's the West comin' tuh? Ridin' up on a tin hoss tuh ask for a job punchin' cows!"

Still, he had taken on Sinclair, who claimed to be from California, and the newcomer proved a fairly good wrangler. He rode a horse well, and used his flivver only on his occasional trips into Dusty Creek.

The Californian did not talk about himself or his past. He wasn't exactly unfriendly, but he appeared not anxious to mix much with his companions. He had curtly refused to join the dancing class in Dusty Creek, and once or twice Link had heard him growl when the boys waxed enthusiastic over the charms of Bonita Barrymore. Privately, the foreman set Sinclair down as a woman-hater.

Of course the crossword puzzles didn't interest the Californian. His only devia-

tions from the normal routine of working, eating and sleeping were his trips to Dusty Creek, eighteen miles away. He always went alone on these trips, and returned with the smell of liquor on him, though he never yet had come back drunk.

"Some day he'll prob'ly bust loose and raise hell around here," Speck Hasty had once prophesied.

"Let's hope it's here and not in Dusty Crick, so's we can handle him," added the foreman.

Shortly after Sinclair's return, the men tumbled into their bunks. The next day was one of arduous labor, but despite this fact, the four hands and their foreman gleefully prepared for the trip into Dusty Creek and the dancing lesson under Bonita Barrymore's direction, when the work was over.

Link Upton shaved with unusual care. The reflection of his face in his twisted mirror didn't please him. He wished he were less homely. Bonita was so very pretty that he always was acutely conscious of his shortcomings in her presence.

"But I reckon I ain't no worse tuh look at than these other jaspers," he consoled himself. "Even the wise Doc is a long jump from a prize beauty. Ed Sinclair is the best lookin' hombre in the outfit, but he ain't got no time for women."

A small hall over a grocery store served as Miss Bonita Barrymore's "dancing studio." By the time Link and the four wranglers arrived a dozen men and women were practicing the steps of a waltz to the music of a none too good horned graphophone.

The teacher greeted the contingent from the Kickin' K with a warm smile. Bonita Barrymore was small, slim and dark. She had bobbed hair and wore a simple little dress short enough to disclose the trimmest pair of ankles in Dusty Creek.

"Hurry and hang up your things," she said. "The lesson has started."

Awkwardly they obeyed. The heart of every member of the quintet had leaped at her smile of welcome, for Bonita smiled very charmingly indeed.

Link Upton followed her every movement with his eyes. There were times,

when the foreman was out of the girl's presence that he wondered if a roughneck wrangler and such a dainty bit of femininity could meet on common ground. Bonita—so she had informed her pupils—had danced a while on the stage. In his more practical musings he had admitted to himself she seemed hardly cut out for life on a cattle ranch.

But once within the sweep of her lustrous dark eyes Link had no practical thoughts about Bonita Barrymore at all. He was completely under the spell of her alluring personality, lost in more or less hopeless adoration.

At the first opportunity, of course, Doc Cushing and his fellow crossworders showed the teacher how much they had accomplished. Her enthusiasm did not escape the foreman. Link swore softly.

A little later Bonita became his partner in a foxtrot—for a few precious moments.

"Not as interested in the crossword puzzles as Mr. Cushing and the others, are you, Mr. Upton?" she half-teased.

"No, Miss Bonita, yuh see—well, I ain't so terrible good along book lines," he stammered. "Ridin' and ropin' and such like is more my style, I reckon."

"The puzzles are really fun," she smiled up at him. "I suppose, though, you get plenty of enjoyment out of other things. Some one told me you were the best rider on the Kickin' K ranch. You must love to be on the back of a horse!"

"Better'n anythin'," admitted Link. "Except — except mebbe dancin' with a partner like—like yuh, Miss Bonita!"

"Oh, Mr. Upton!" She seemed a trifle startled. "Really, I—do you know, you boys from the ranch are my very best pupils? I'm planning to give a dance in the Masonic Hall here a week from Saturday night with a real orchestra, and I do want you all to be there."

"Even a new hoof and mouth plague won't keep us away, Miss Bonita!" he promised.

The announcement of the forthcoming dance, made at the conclusion of the lesson, was heartily applauded. Particularly by representatives of the Kickin' K, each of whom resolved privately that not even two

broken legs could keep him away from Dusty Creek a week from Saturday night.

Four of the quintet were very gay and loquacious as they loped back toward the ranch. "They talked of the dance and the new batch of puzzles Miss Barrymore had dug up for them, most of which were extremely difficult, according to Doc Cushing.

"Yuh hombres make me plum' weary!" growled the foreman. "Miss Bonita asked me tuhnight if I liked them damn puzzles and I told her no, I was a growed-up man."

"Seems like I heard her mention that," nodded Pete Brown, with malice, "and she reckoned it funny that a growed man never had learned to read or write."

"Naturally, too," chimed in Doc, "Miss Barrymore is more interested in men who can meet her on the same intellectual level."

"Yeh?" snapped Link. "Well, it was me Miss Bonita first give out the plans of the big dance tuh. Giggles that off, yuh wise jaspers!"

During the ten days that intervened before the "ball" in the Masonic Hall the Kickin' K hands were extremely busy. Fences had to be fixed, beeves shipped, and a lot of strays rounded up. There wasn't much time for crossword puzzles or anything else outside the lines of duty.

On the Saturday afternoon preceding the big dance, Link Upton came riding in from an inspection trip to find old Ben Kennard awaiting him at the ranchhouse.

"We've lost a wrangler, Link," declared the owner. "That feller Sinclair. Suddenly come in at noon tuhday, drew his wages, and beat it off in his tin contrapshun."

"Did he say why he was quittin'?" asked the somewhat amazed foreman.

"Naw, not much. Only that this outfit was gettin' on his nerves."

"Huh! I think mebber I understand, Ben." Link grinned.

It was probably as he had thought right along. The Californian was a woman-hater. His surly scowls and silent grimaces whenever the coming dance or the charms of Bonita Barrymore had been discussed had not been missed by the foreman the last few days. Fed up, doubtless a nomad, anyway, Sinclair had just pulled stakes

"Reckon we can spare him, though, Link, can't we?" remarked Kennard.

"Yeh. They's plenty uv hands as good as him."

Under the pale light of a crescent moon the quintet from the Kickin' K journeyed into Dusty Creek that night. Each man was accoutered in his finest garb, shaved and slicked up to his individual conception of perfection.

Never had Link Upton dressed more meticulously. A dazzling new silk shirt and a brand-new beaver atop his oiled-back hair were outstanding features of his raiment. At that, he had but a slight edge over the four wranglers, who also had made investments.

Masonic Hall was already fairly crowded when the five horsemen arrived. Lively music was being played by the four-piece orchestra consisting of piano, violin, saxophone, and drums. From all indications the dance was destined to be a success.

But before many minutes passed Link Upton noted something. Bonita Barrymore, with every reason to be pleased by the turnout and music, still did not seem her usual self. Her smile wasn't quite so spontaneous. To the foreman, there appeared a hint of trouble in her dark eyes.

Nor was he the only one to perceive all was not well. Doc Cushing, the first of the Kickin' K group to get a dance with the pretty teacher, came grumbling back to Stubby Larkin and Speck Hasty.

"I started to tell her all about that trick puzzle with the hard verticals, and she paid hardly a bit of attention!" was the plaint Link overheard.

Almost three-quarters of an hour passed before the foreman managed to get a waltz with Bonita. The girl did not seem in a talkative mood.

"Pretty good crowd tuhnight," Link finally observed. "I sorta reckon—"

A gasp from his companion made him pause. Simultaneously, Pete Brown and a heavyweight partner bumped him, and he lost thought of everything save straightening out his feet.

Swinging back into step at last, he glanced across the hall—and caught sight of an unexpected face. Glowering sullenly

at the dancing couples was Ed Sinclair, the Californian who had quit the ranch that day.

"Well, who'd 'a' figured that jasper to show up here?" he muttered. "Ain't no place for a woman-hater like him!"

The orchestra finished the first half. Bonita spoke.

"I feel a little faint. Would you please bring me a drink, Mr. Upton?"

"I sure will, Miss Bonita."

There was a bowl of punch on a table at the other end of the hall. Link forced his way through the thirsty folk surrounding it and, after a slight delay, acquired a tin cup of pinkish liquid.

Returning with this, he was surprised to find the girl gone. A rear door was ajar, though; perhaps she had stepped outside for fresh air.

The foreman pushed through the door. Down at the bottom of a flight of stairs he glimpsed two figures, evidently arguing with one another. The moonlight enabled him to recognize Bonita—and Ed Sinclair!

The greatly amazed Link had reached the little landing above just in time to catch the girl's voice angrily exclaiming:

"You worthless, no-account beast!"

Snarling something in reply, Sinclair abruptly grabbed Bonita in his arms and dashed across the street with the squirming figure. He threw her roughly into his flivver and leaped in.

Link Upton dropped the cup of punch. He reached for a gun. Then he recalled that he had left his shooting-iron back at the ranch, in compliance with the rules of polite etiquette.

However, with a woman in peril, the foreman knew there was no time to stand still and lament. He plunged down the steps and raced the few yards to the spot where Swiftfoot, his sorrel horse, was tied. Already Sinclair's flivver was bouncing down the street.

The unarmed but undaunted Link vaulted into the saddle and soon was urging the sorrel into a swift gallop.

"We gotta catch 'em, Swiftfoot!" he muttered. "They's man's work ahead! I reckon it 'll take more'n ability to untangle crossword curlycues to get her outa this!"

He was inclined to exult a little over his great chance. While Doc Cushing and his fellow puzzle patchers were dancing away in the hall, all unconscious of what had happened, it was he who was riding to the rescue of the pretty teacher.

The foreman gave just one thought to Sinclair's behavior.

"He busted loose tuh-night. Full uv hooch, prob'ly. He must be crazy to grab Miss Bonita like that and run away with her!"

The Californian's machine rattled out of Dusty Creek at no modest clip, and not until the road began to grow rougher did the sorrel start narrowing the distance between pursued and pursuer.

Gradually, however, the gap decreased. Link's fingers experimented with the rope at his saddlehorn. Could he check the flying flivver? He resolved to bluff.

"Slam on yuhr brakes, Sinclair, afore I yank yuh clean outa that tin tub!" he yelled.

Apparently Sinclair knew who was following. And he rather surprised Link by bringing the little car to a stop. Not only did he do this, but he also jumped out of the machine.

"Pile off that höss, yuh big Romeo!" he barked in a tone which seemed very little intoxicated. "I been wantin' tuh take a poke at yuh for some time!"

The foreman of the Kickin' K scrambled from the sorrel. He stole one glance at the car. Bonita, face pale and eyes darkly wide in the moonlight, was straightening up in the front seat.

The next moment Link Upton found himself in the midst of plenty of action. Sinclair launched a furious and not ineffective attack. A right-hand smash caught the foreman on the side of the jaw, dropping him to his knees and loosening a couple of good teeth.

"This jasper ain't no slouch!" Link grunted, regaining his feet.

Back and forth, in the space around the flivver, they battled. Fists flailed and thudded home. Occasionally the combatants would come to grips and then break loose after administering considerable personal damage. Big, rawboned, hard as

nails, Link had won some little reputation as a fighter in the past; but he was finding Sinclair a worthy foe.

Once the foreman thought he heard Bonita's voice screaming for them to stop, but he was too busy to pay any attention.

At the end of four or five minutes the foreman's superior stamina began to tell. Sinclair's blows lost force. Finally a sledge hammer left from Link tumbled him off his feet. Gamely he started to clamber up, and the foreman unsteadily tried to set himself for a finishing wallop.

To his utter amazement then, a small fury flashed at him and two little fists beat against his battered visage.

"You awful brute, you!" cried Bonita Barrymore.

The next instant she was kneeling by the side of Sinclair, who was too weak to rise. Her arms went about him.

"Oh, Ed!" she sobbed. "I've been horrid! It's all my fault! Please forgive me, dear!"

"I—I ain't done up yet, honey!" Valiantly the Californian tried to rise, but Bonita held tightly.

"Say, who is this hombre, Miss Bonita?" filtered through Link's puffed lips. A dark suspicion had assailed him.

"He is *my husband*!" flashed the girl.

"But—but ain't yuhr name Barrymore and his Sinclair?" stammered the dazed foreman.

"My name is really Sinclair. Bonita Barrymore is my old stage name, if I must explain to you."

"Reckon I made a big mistake, Miss—Missus Sinclair. I'm plum' sorry. I had no idea Ed Sinclair was yuhr hubby. None uv us at the ranch knowed it."

"We had a terrible quarrel and separated several months ago," confessed Bonita, still at her husband's side. "Both of us got foolishly mad, and I thought Ed most unreasonable—and he was. So I came to Dusty Creek and started giving dancing lessons under my stage name.

"First thing I knew Ed was working on your ranch. He's always been jealous of me, and he used to ride in and tell me I must quit because all the wranglers were

in love with me. I was stubborn and wouldn't listen, and then I guess he'd go and drink.

"However, I was pretty careful. I started some of the cow hands working crossword puzzles to keep them occupied. I couldn't get you, though, and I was rather afraid of you. All the time following me with greedy eyes!"

"I didn't know yuh was married, darn it!" gulped poor Link.

"Well, you're to blame for a lot, anyway!" she accused. "Ed was very angry about this dance to-night, because of all the talk over it around the ranch. He came to me this afternoon, saying he had quit.

He wanted me to make up. I nearly did, and then got mad again. All I did this evening was worry on account of it, and finally Ed came and saw me dancing with you. He got me outside and in his jealousy said some things that made me flare up. Next I knew he'd grabbed me and was running away. I don't know where we were going, and I didn't really care. But you had to follow and start a fight and—"

"I'll get even with him yet, honey!" Sinclair mumbled.

"Never you mind, dear!" Tenderly she patted his bruised features. "I've learned my lesson, Ed. We won't quarrel any more. As for you, you ranch bully, I hope I never see you again! I hate you!"

There were several things the luckless Link might have said. But he combined them all into the one whole-souled phrase.

"Oh, hell!" exclaimed the foreman of the Kickin' K.

Mounting Swiftfoot, he rode dejectedly away. Nor did he head the sorrel toward Dusty Creek. He had no desire to re-enter the dance hall in his present gory condition, and explain. He craved the solitude of the bunkhouse, for Bonita's words had hurt him more than the fists of her husband.

He was asleep when the four wranglers returned early Sunday morning, though it had taken him some time to drop off to slumber.

Aware of swollen lips, an empurpled eye

and other marks of conflict, Link nevertheless grimly took his place at the breakfast table with four weary cow hands. He pretended not to notice the covert grins at his appearance. He wondered if the quartet had any inkling of the truth.

"Brought back yuhr new beaver with us," ventured Stubby Larkin. "Yuh left it at the hall last night."

"Thanks."

"Was yuh in a scrap with somebody, Link?" queried Pete Brown. "What happened tuh yuh? Why did yuh leave the hall?"

"Yuh jaspers oughta be good at riddles—yuh've been workin' them crossword puz-

zles so long!" harshly returned the foreman. "Try and find out!"

Stubby Larkin and Speck Hasty grinned in a suddenly sheepish way, but Doc Cushing's next words told everything.

"We're working on a puzzle now," he asserted. "We hope to find a nine-letter proper name in two parts that means a noble, brave hero riding to the rescue of distressed damsels, and—"

Doubtless it was rude and unmannerly of Link, not to say uneconomic and wasteful. Yet the fact remains there wasn't a drop of sirup left for the hot cakes after the foreman had neatly bounced the can container off of Doc's intellectual forehead.

THE END

THE ARGOSIES

ABOVE the roofs in every street
The aerials lift against the skies
Their slender masts; like some vast fleet
Of silent, sailless argosies,
Freighted one knows not how nor why
Or if earth lighter them or sky.

I look, the dull brick houses wear
The same look they have always worn;
Their shades are drawn halfway with care,
Their doorknobs shine. And yet, is borne
Through those staid walls this wild new thing!
Across their roofs far places sing!

The rub we envied Aladdin
Was toil compared to this; one small
Swift turn of wrist, and lo! within
A stuffy room the wide world's call!
Or, waving o'er one bedfast long
The magic healing wand of song!

The trolleys clang, the big trucks pull,
A huckster goes from door to door,
The children saunter home from school,
The same old city scenes, no more,
And all the while, against the skies
Those still, mysterious argosies!

Grace H. Sherwood.



The Tour of the Bouncing Junk

By THOMAS THURSDAY

A FEW years ago a pencil pounder named Rudyard Kipling grabbed a sheet of the king's bond and dashed off the following gem:

A trout is only a trout—but a good cigar is a smoke!

Ask brother-in-law Joseph about that! Ever since I been wed to his charming sister—a year and a half, according to her, but ten years if you ask me—her clown brother has been kind enough to tell us how to live, learn, love, grunt, groan, howl, cry, or what have you?

Well, as the old oaken bucket remarked, one evening around supper time this dizzy boob relative comes dashing into our love-nest with a bright idea buzzing around what passes for his brains.

"Hello, sister," he greets, taking his fa-

vorite seat at the table. "Ha!" he sniffs, "Flounders, hey? Well, well, well—not so bad, but—er—when it comes to fish, you should ought to buy some speckled trout. Rippling brooks, what a tasty mouthful they are! Say, when me and Mike McGoldburg went angling up in the Adirondacks last year, we had a mess of trout for every meal. Bill, you ought to try your luck at the sport."

"Blaah!" I says, polite. "You never caught anything but pneumonia. Trout, eh? Don't make me laugh. I bet the only time you ever got any trout was when you went fishing in Ike Mahoney's South Sea Fish Store."

"Brother Joseph is an excellent fisherman," puts in my helpmate. "Anyway, I fail to see why we can't all have a little spring vacation."

"Fine!" I agree. "But, listen, honey

bunch, where do we garner the money for hotel and railroads?"

"Da da!" adds my baby Alexander, who is always taking his poor father's part.

"Listen to that stonehead!" blurbs Joseph, nearly choking on some costly food. "What d'yer mean—hotels and railroad fare? Ain't you never heard of automobiles and tents?"

"What are you driving at?" I want to know.

"Sizzling spaniel—what a boob you are!" he snorts. "Sister, you sure married a prize chump! Bill ain't never heard of motor camping and touring. Why, last year alone two million cars transported about ten million tourists across the country. They went out in everything from a 1856 flivver to a new Beverwick sedan. They packed a tent on the running board and laughed at hotels and railroads for months at a time. Laugh *that* off!"

"Isn't that *wonderful*?" enthuses the missus. "I'd just love to go on a trip like that, really. I'm so tired of being around this stuffy old place. And I'm sure that baby Alexander would enjoy it, too."

"Great!" I says. "But whose car do we go in, and, tell me, where do we get the tent?"

"Getting a car and tent is a cinch!" ejaculates the brilliant Joseph. "Don't worry—I'll attend to all *that* part. Right now I know where I can grab off a second-hand boat that's a shade better than new—also a tent. And all for two hundred berries."

"Raspberries?" I ask innocently.

He snorts at my jovial wit.

"If that's supposed to be funny," he says, "then 'Hamlet' is the world's greatest comedy! Now kindly shut up a minute and listen to me. To-morrow morning you tell that money-loving boss of yours that you have suddenly contracted some fierce ailment—see? Tell 'im you need at least a week to get back on your feet—otherwise you won't be worth a German sou markee to the business, which is prob'ly the truth, anyway. Get the big idea?"

"Go on with the movie," I says, sarcastic. "Where did you say the money for the car and tent comes in, huh?"

"Where in the Flint d'yer suppose it comes in—through the window? I'll attend to all that. After, we can go fifty-fifty on the deal."

"I *do* wish," butts in my radiant soul mate, "that you'd let brother Joseph manage things. He's so smart when it comes to arrangements."

Don't you love that?

"Besides the car and tent, I'll get some fishing tackle," he goes on, diving into his third cup of sixty-cents-a-pound Java.

"What for?"

"Listen to 'im," he snorted. "What d'yer suppose we need 'em for—to trap porcupines? I'm going to show you how to catch trout, and plenty of 'em!"

"Trout, eh?" he sneers. "Say, you wouldn't know a trout from a Patagonian giraffe. Boy, be yourself!"

"Is that so?" he flares. "I'll just bet you now, stupid, that I catch more trout than you. The man who loses has to pay for the whole outfit. Is it a bet?"

"I know that Joseph is a wonderful fisherman," adds the lady. "When we were both children he used to take me down to the old mill stream and catch lots of bullheads."

"Ha-ha—only bullheads, huh?" I giggle.

"Any fool can catch bullheads! A bullhead is so dumb it will even bite on carbolic acid."

"Never mind the blaah," Joseph growls.

"Are you willing to take the bet, or ain't you? Remember, though, the guy who loses pays for the whole outfit. And I'll let you get your trout any old way, except *buy* 'em."

"I'll go you!" I fires back. "Believe me, if you can cast out and catch anything but pneumonia, I'll be glad to pay for the whole shebang."

"Then it's a bet," beams Joseph, getting up and reaching for his hat. "I'll be around with the whole outfit Sunday morning early. Then we start for the mountains. By-by, sister; ta-ta, Alexander; so long, clown!"

Well, to dwarf a long story, I prevail upon the boss to release me for a week, laying claim to symptoms of paresis, ague, and assorted diphtheria. So *that* was all

settled. The missus packs about everything that we positively wouldn't need on a camping and touring trip, including Alexander's go-cart and a silk shirt I got when Cleveland was elected.

"Better leave home the grand piano," I suggest meekly.

"I'll attend to the packing!" she gloops. And believe me, boys and girls, she does!

II.

SUNDAY morning, two hours before daylight, I hear what I think is a three-alarm fire in the block. If it wasn't that it must have been an earthquake! I hop out of my downy bed—ha, ha!—dashed to what is innocently called the reception room, and hurl up a window. Peering into the darkness, I hear a familiar voice.

"Hey, Bill!" it yelps. "What's the matter? You should have been ready long ago. Shake it up—I got the boat all primed to go! Jus' listen to that motor purr!"

Hot Fido—what a racket!

"What's the idea of waking up the city so early?" I holler down. "For the love of Pete, shut off that tornado! What is it?"

"What d'yer mean—what is it?" he yelps. "Does it look like an airship?"

"Sounds like a war," I shoot down. "Better turn it off before the neighbors lynch you."

"You're crazy!" he hoots. "The motor is no less than a Salient Silent Four."

Suddenly about sixteen windows open hither and yon. Out of the sixteen no less than fifty heads bob out and give Joseph the idea that they could do without his presence.

"Hey, where's the fire?" howls one enraged fella with a towel wrapped around his knob.

"S'matter?" yelps another. "Did that gas main bust again?"

"Hey, you!" roars a third disturbed cliff dweller. "If you don't turn off that Gettysburg I'll come down and crown yer!"

Joseph turns it off.

Half an hour later we're dressed and go down to see what sort of bargain Joseph has bought. What a terrible sight it was!

One thing was positive, it certainly wasn't any shape or form of a Beverwick."

"How much did this mess set us back?" I want to know.

"Only two hundred," enthuses Joseph. "It was worth a thousand when it was new, and it's worth at least five hundred right now. Some scow, hey?"

"Yeah," I says. "I wonder why Columbus sold it?"

Joseph ignores the doubtful wit, and jumps into the driver's seat.

"Let's go!" he orders. "I wanna try and make Lake George by to-night."

"Isn't it a sweet little car!" enthuses the missus. "I just knew that brother Joseph would get a bargain."

Well, to get down to brass tacks, as the hammer says, we start off with brother dear doing what is supposed to be driving. As we head into Yonkers, he misses a traffic cop's shins by a mere inch. However, between New York and Albany, he only makes one stop—the time he bumps into a guy with a brand new Codillo, near Poughkeepsie.

Although Joseph hits the innocent party in the rear, he has the nerve to hop out and call the liveried chauffeur everything but his right name. The braided gent doesn't waste any time in trying to compete with Joseph's flow of steamed language. Without uttering a single adjective, he hauls off and pops the dumb wonder a torrid left to the nose, whilst his boss applauds the boxing match. After which, the pilot hops onto his seat and speeds away, leaving the world and the dust to Joseph. Furious he makes a bluff at trying to head him off, but by the time we arrived at Lake George, the Codillo must of been passing Labrador and points north!

At Lake George we camp for the night. Joseph wakes me early next morning and leads me to what he calls the world's greatest trout stream, and we start the contest. Although I was positive that he didn't know any more about the fine art—"fine" is right—of trout fishing than I did about wearing two noses, I decided not to take any chances of losing the bet. The whole outfit, including the car, cost about three hundred pesos, and if I could get the bril-

liant dummy to pay the bill, why, not only good, but gooder.

"You can use the worms," says Joseph, "I'll bait my hook with a grasshopper. But it won't make no difference *what* you put on your hook, anyways. You wouldn't get a nibble if you baited it with ten-dollar gold pieces!"

I ignore the jovial Joseph, clap a Kings County worm on the hook and cast out. Even before he has his line ready, I have a little luck. I see the cork go six feet below the surface, and give a quick yank. I land a one-ounce sardine. I'm good, what?

"Oh, William caught the first trout!" yelps the missus. Joseph takes one look at the infant fish, then rends the air with a loud cackle.

"Trout—beans!" he bellers. "That's a common chub. If they's any trout to be caught around this water, I'll hook 'em!"

"Blaah!" I says—merely that and nothing more.

"I got a real bite," buzzes Joseph a moment later. He starts to reel in and his pole bends almost double. I began to feel a little nervous, believing the fathead was about to land a four-pound laker. Not so good!

He gives the pole a final yank—and comes up with a pip of a snapping turtle. Have a laugh at that!

"Looks if trouts have changed their shapes lately," I purrs innocently.

"Be yourself, stupid!" he hoots. "You can't even hook a turtle!"

Well, to make this contribution to the classics a little shorter, I'll say that during the next three hours me and Joseph catch ten minnows, six frogs and fifteen dead branches. We also catch a little rheumatism.

"Trout ain't biting around here," he says, reeling in for the last time. "Let's go. I think this spot is a bloomer this year, anyway. We'll break camp and drive up to the Cascade Lakes. They tell me they got so many trout up there that they ain't got water enough to swim around in."

And then the fun commenced!

When we reached the Cascades, Joseph begins by camping on private property. We don't discover that little item until we get

the tent pitched, dinner started and are about to snare the festive fish. Then a genial jinni looms on the horizon and announces that he will give us five minutes to break up housekeeping. He also adds that said five minutes is exactly four minutes and forty-five seconds *more* than he gave the last birds, without shooting. So we pull up stakes and move to the head of the lake.

"If anybody tries to chase us from here I'll crown 'im!" gloops the brave Joseph, though he ain't got nerve enough to crown a king, honest.

Dinner over and under, we start after the elusive trout. I make a line for baby Alexander, just to keep the little dear quiet. I put a couple of tame mosquitoes on the hook, set him near the shore and cast the line out. Joseph is the first to get a strike, just as a train comes tooting along the single track that borders the lake. He reels in and muffs the fish.

"The durn whistle scared the fish offa the hook!" snorts Joseph.

Tie that for an alibi, boys and girls!

Suddenly I notice darling Alexander heading for the water, plumb on his tummy. He's got a deathlike grip on the branch pole, and there's some jerking at the line, that's a cinch!

"Quick," yelps the missus, "look out for the baby!"

I rush to my infant's assistance, grab him in one hand and the pole in the other and pull up. Believe it or not, the kid has a two-pound speckled trout dangling from the hook!

"Da!" he remarks.

"That's one for me!" I shout.

"What d'ye mean—one for you?" gloops the peevish Joseph.

"He's in the family, ain't he?" I holler. "And you said yourself that I could get trout *anyway*, so long as I didn't buy 'em. You were so sure that you could beat me catching trout that you put that in the bet, didn't you? Then, as you did, stop welching!"

"Sure, I said it," admits he. "And you can have the trout on your score, for all I care. I'll fish against you and the baby *any time*!"

Just then he gets a bite and hauls up a trout about six inches long.

"How's that?" he beams. "Ain't he a peach?"

"Congratulations," I says; "now we're even."

During the next three hours Joseph catches five small perch, two chubs and a bullfrog; but no trout. As for yours truly, I catch nothing more than a few assorted chills. As to Alexander, he hooks a couple of sneezes and so that was that.

Now comes what the novelists call the climax. Here goes—hold everything!

We was about to call it a draw, being one to one in favor of the trout, and I figured that me and Joseph would have to divide up the expenses of the trip. All of which would give Joseph what some original sap refers to as a severe pain. Then along came the train, the hawk—well, just a moment!

Before going any further with this contribution to the classics—although I realize that the suspense must be something fierce—I herewith offer as a reward anything from a two-by-four custard pie to a thousand berries to any Mrs. or Mr. who can prove that what actually happened is *not* within what the professors call the "realms

of possibility." So that's that. And this is this:

An express train came roaring down the single track, going at no less than fifty miles per hour. Directly over it flew a hawk, flying at the same speed. Now, get this, please: As he neared the grade crossing, the engineer blew three terrific blasts on the whistle. The hawk gives a startled flutter, opens its talons and drops something from its clutches. It came hurtling down and, a moment later, lands in the lap of baby Alexander. I dash over wildly and take a look.

The kid has his hands on a three-pound trout!

Woof—what d'yer know about that?

"Da da!" remarks the world's greatest baby as he socks it on the tail with his rattle.

"Well, Joseph," I says coyly, "that makes two for us. Guess we win, huh?"

"Talk about dumb luck!" whoops the dazed and disgusted Joseph. "Believe me, if you fell into a manhole you'd come up with a fistful of diamonds!"

"Never mind that part," I says. "Just talk about *paying!*"

Now *you* tell one.

THE END

UNANIMOUS

A PHARISEE stood in a public place
And prayed like a son of a gun.
A raptured expression was on his face
When that egotist prayer was done.

For thus did he murmur—that Pharisee—
Right out in the public's ken:
Gave thanks to the listening Lord that he
So differed from other men!

Each "other man" who had heard this crack
Was filled with a pure delight;
And said, as he chucklingly turned his back:
"Thank Heaven, the guv' is right!"

Strickland Gillilan.

Call a Cop!

In London the Scotland Yard detective has some of the pertinacious qualities of the bulldog. Members of the Parisian Surete are noted for their qualities of impulsive imagination. The Berlin patrolman is only a cog in a mechanical machine.

The American policeman is JUST A COP. That's all. And it is as it should be. In this country where each citizen places a supreme value on his rights as an individual he would be intolerant of a bullying, swaggering police supervision. His policeman is, and must be, a regular fellow, just another human being. The heads of the police departments of American cities are not cloistered university professors, proud of their Phi Beta Kappa keys and their sequestered lives. They are men who started their careers patrolling a beat. Their promotions have been *based on merit, and merit alone.*

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